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OR, THE TIGRESS of TEXAS.

A Romance of Buck Taylor and his
Boys in Buckskin, and com-
panion story to the
"Lasso King."

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

CHAPTER I.

THE COWBOY CLANS.

SOMETHING of strange moment had happened, for two bands of horsemen were facing each other upon the open prairie, and between them was a group of dismounted men, gathered around a form lying upon the ground, apparently lifeless.

The prostrate form was of gigantic size, a man perfect in physique, handsome in face, and who bore the stamp of splendid manhood upon his features, whatever might be the evil in his heart.

The face wore the pallor of death now, for he had fallen in a duel with one who stood near him.

"THE GRAVE IS EMPTY, MADAM, AS YOU SEE: TIGER TOM, YOUR HUSBAND, IS NOT DEAD," SAID BUCK TAYLOR.

The Cowboy Clan.

And a strange duel it had been, between two who were noted on the Texas prairies—one as a Desperado Ranchero, a lawless, reckless character, cattleman, gambler, and it was said, also, a bandit, though that had not been actually proven.

Behind his followers—a band of two-score reckless-faced, well-mounted and thoroughly armed cowboys—rose a hill, looking like a sugar-loaf on the prairie, an advanced sentinel it seemed, standing a mile or more away from a range of hills that formed a background for the level lands.

Upon this hill, where, a century before, Spaniards from across the Rio Grande had founded a Mission, was the home of the man who had fallen in the duel fought with lariats, and there present was his wife, a spectator of the tragic scene.

The band of cowboys who were followers of the fallen man, were uneasy now, and gazed toward the little group of dismounted men with looks of considerable anxiety.

The horsemen in the rear of the group, about equal in numbers to their antagonists, were a daring-faced set of Texans, splendidly mounted, armed to the teeth and carrying at their saddle-horns the weapon they had just seen a duel fought with, between their chief and the Ranchero Desperado, known as "Tiger Tom," and also as the "The Tiger of Texas."

They seemed anxious and willing to make a charge upon the followers of the fallen chief, sweep them from the prairie and dashing on up the steep trail to the ruined Mission, which had been made the home of the Desperado Ranchero, carry it by storm.

But their chief gave no such order, and the compact had been that the duel with the lariats between the leaders should end the difficulty—the followers of the one who fell to disperse in peace.

The group of dismounted men were three in number.

One of these was a man with a military bearing, some forty-five years of age, and nobility stamped upon every feature of his fine face.

He had been an army surgeon, had married a beautiful Mexican girl whom he had rescued from her kidnappers, and, resigning his commission, had dared to settle upon the lawless border and establish a ranch, making him a comfortable and happy home, and growing rich rapidly, becoming known as a "cattle king."

He still affected an army dress, for he wore a blue suit, fatigue jacket and pants stuck in the top of his cavalry boots, with a black sombrero encircled by a cord.

One of the other two was a man known only as "Monte Joe, the gambler."

If he had other name no one in Texas had yet been able to discover what it was.

He was a man of thirty-five, perhaps older, with a darkly bronzed face, a long, drooping, brown mustache, waving hair of the same hue, and worn long, for it fell upon his shoulders, and with most expressive features.

There was much in his face to admire, and yet he was one to stand in awe of, for there appeared to be a mask upon his countenance which no one could see through.

His bearing also was military, his form tall, slender and his every movement graceful.

His hands and feet were very small and shapely, and his dress might be called elegant for that wild land. He wore a velvet jacket of Mexican pattern, a silk sash, pants stuck in finely-made boots, an embroidered sombrero, gold spurs, and weapons mounted with the same precious metal.

His horse, standing near with three others, was a superb animal. It was accoutered with Mexican saddle, bridle and trappings.

The third man of the group standing over the prostrate form, was the one who had wielded his lasso so dexterously that he laid his giant foe low.

It was Buck Taylor, known by a number of sobriquets—the "Cowboy Chief," the "Saddle King," "Lasso King," etc.

Six feet four, slenderly formed, yet an athlete and of giant strength, he was the typical Texan cowboy, the beau ideal of a reckless, dashing prairie-man, a veritable Knight of the Rope.

"Yes, he is dead, for his neck was broken by your lariat, Buck," said Edward Hassan, the ex-army surgeon, whom his men called by courtesy "captain," and he rose from beside the form of the fallen Hercules.

"At last, then, the Tiger of Texas is dead," Monte Joe remarked, impressively, and he added: "And by your hand, Buck Taylor."

"Then the compact shall be kept, for his men are to go their way in peace," was the response of the King of the Lasso, and he glanced over toward the followers of the Tiger of Texas, who sat upon their horses facing their foes, the Cowboy Clan, whom they had every reason to dread as sworn enemies to all lawless men.

CHAPTER II.

THE MIDNIGHT BURIAL.

It was a weird scene, the burial of Tiger Tom by moonlight, within a few hundred yards of his ranch.

The spot chosen was in a grove of pines, over-

looking the boundless prairie upon three sides, and with the mountain range in the background.

Monte Joe, the gambler, had borne the body to the widow, telling her that Buck Taylor, the Lasso King, had sent to her the form of her husband.

The cowboys of the Desperado Ranchero had dispersed their separate ways, according to compact; the Clan of the Saddle King had followed their chief back to Fort S—, where they served in the double capacity of Government herders and scout rangers. The woman who had loved the giant ranchero had been left almost alone in her sorrow, save for a few men to guard the cattle, and a faithful old negress who had followed the fortunes of her young mistress from her Louisiana home to the one on the Texas frontier.

And the wife of the man accused of being a law-breaker, a deserter from the army, a murderer, a fugitive from justice, yet a person to look upon and admire—one, indeed, to win a woman's admiration and love—ay, more! for Valerie Tracey had loved the man she married to idolatry.

Her thoughts went back several years to a burning steamer on the Mississippi River, when Thomas Tracey, unknown save 'twas said he was a gambler, had saved her life, and the lives of many others at the risk of his own, and had been the hero of that night of appalling horrors.

Gentle as a woman then, with the courage of true manhood he had done his heroic work with no thought of self, and she had learned to love him, had wedded him, and after the death of her mother, being left alone in the world, had drifted to Texas with her husband, where the demon in his nature had asserted its influence toward others, yet never toward her.

Still she had loved him, blindly following fate, until now she was to consign to his last resting-place the man who was to carry her heart with him, into the grave.

Under the silvery light of the moon, as though not wishing her sorrow revealed in the full glare of the day, the cowboys still on the ranch bore the form of the late chief to his grave dug among the pines.

Wrapped in a gay-colored Mexican serape, the form was lowered to its place, while the voice of the woman fell softly upon the air as she repeated the burial service for the dead:

"Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

With uncovered heads the group of men stood, deeply impressed with the sad scene, while the winds sighing through the pines seemed like a requiem over the departed.

Unmindful that other eyes than those about the grave were turned upon the scene, the last rites were finished, and the men turned away.

The wife still lingered, and the negress was by her side.

But the words came from the widowed woman:

"Leave me alone with my dead, Aunt Liza."

"Poor chile," muttered the negress, as she turned away and walked toward the ranch on the hill-top, among the timber, where a cheering light was visible, though all was so drear and solemn among the pines.

When left alone, the woman stood with bowed head by the grave, her hands clasped in front of her.

The moonlight streamed through the open space and fell full upon her, revealing a face still young—for she was, in truth, scarcely out of her teens—beautiful and refined, yet full of expression and spirit, though tinged now with deepest sorrow. Her form was the perfection of symmetry.

After the negress had disappeared, she dropped upon her knees, burying her face in her hands, and bowed her head until her forehead touched the grave.

And from over among the rocks, not fifty feet away, strange eyes regarded her, for a man was crouching there, gazing with rapt attention upon the scene.

He it was who had seen the midnight burial, had watched every move of those who bore the giant chief to his grave and placed him in it, and now regarded the woman left alone there in her poignant grief, with keenest interest.

That he was hiding was proven by his crouching attitude and the fact that he did not make his presence known, though certainly he could not fear the woman.

He was upon his knees among the rocks, a scrub tree before him, and through its branches he peered.

"Will she never go?" he murmured as the minutes went by and the quivering woman still lingered.

It seemed long hours to him, but only minutes to her, that she lingered there; but at last, she arose to her feet, turned slowly away and walked toward the ranch home, from which the light still streamed brightly forth.

As she reached the edge of the pines she turned and glanced backward, halted for a minute, and then once again moved sadly away disappearing in the heavier timber that crowned the hill-top.

Then the man in hiding came forth from

among the rocks, and stealthily approached the grave.

He gazed about him like one who felt that he was an intruder—who feared to be seen.

Reaching the mound he quickly glanced about him, and his eyes falling upon the shovels, left there by the men, he set to work with energy to throw the earth out of the grave.

He worked rapidly and untiringly, and at last, as he neared the form below, with caution.

At last the shovel struck other than earth, and throwing it aside he seized the serape-enshrouded form and dragged it from the grave.

He shook off the loose earth, and bearing the form among the rocks, great as was the weight of the body, placed it there, while he returned quickly to the grave.

Rapidly he threw in the earth, shaping up the mound again as it was before, destroying certain traces of his presence, and then tossing the shovel aside, returned to where he had left the body.

Placing it upon his back he descended the steep trail to the prairie, across which he walked until two dark objects came in sight.

They were horses, one saddled, the other a pack-animal.

Placing the form of the chief upon one, he mounted the other and rode away over the moonlit prairie, taking a trail leading to the Rio Grande.

CHAPTER III.

THE BATTLE OF THE CLANS.

THE "Cavern of Canyons," as it was called, was a wild, weird, desolate place which men shunned as a place of ill-omen.

It was told that once an Indian tribe had dwelt there in its caves, and all had been massacred by others who were their foes.

Other stories were that a wagon-train of emigrants had taken refuge there from Comanches, and all had been slain.

Certain it was that many human bones were to be found about the place, and though a trail had once run through the canyon it was said that no one ever had the courage to go that way.

The canyon severed a range of hills, cutting it in twain and was several miles in length, broad in places, narrow in others and with some timber and bits of meadow-land here and there, while a stream fed by springs wound its way through it.

From its entrance to its egress there was no way of leaving the canyon by scaling the rocky sides, which were dotted with caves which had given it its name.

In one of these caverns, very large and above which towered rocks in fantastic shapes which caused it to be known as the Cathedral, a group of men were gathered some six months after the duel on the prairie between Buck Taylor and Tiger Tom.

They were a wild-looking set of men, reckless, and armed in a manner that proved they were not upon a peaceful mission in being there.

Some of them were asleep upon their blankets, a few idly smoking their pipes, others chatting together and most of them were gambling with cards.

Without, staked upon the meadow plots here and there, were their horses, none of which were saddled or bridled.

It was a pleasant Sabbath afternoon, not a guard appeared to be on watch, and it seemed as though the men were resting, for the scene was a restful one, indeed.

Now and then a voice would break forth in song, then the notes of a guitar skillfully played was heard, broken in upon rudely by boisterous laughter, or an oath, as some gambler saw his money swept away by a more lucky player than himself.

But suddenly without was heard a wild and terrible war-cry, and the cheers of the Cowboy Clans followed, with the rattle of hoofs, the jingle of spurs, and snorting of startled horses.

As one man the wild crew in the huge cavern sprang to their feet, while a voice of thunder rung in a thousand echoes among the rocks:

"Men, Buck Taylor and his Lasso Kings are upon us!"

"It is to beat them or die at the rope end!"

The speaker dashed from the rear of the cavern as he spoke, having just sprung from his blankets where he had been sleeping.

He rushed toward the front of the cavern, a revolver in each hand.

Could the grave give up its dead?

Could the man who was slain again appear as flesh and blood, full of life, ready again to face death, to meet his old foes, for the man was the Tiger of Texas.

The men upon whom he called were at first taken completely by surprise, and many a bronzed and bearded face turned pale as the wild yells of Buck Taylor's Cowboys rung in their ears.

They knew that they had been surprised, that when they had gathered at the call of their desperate chief, in that secluded canyon, they had been careless, placing out no sentinel to warn them of danger, and a foe more cunning than they were, was upon them.

Without their horses had been seized, and when they rallied and attempted to escape from the canyon by one way, they saw there too they were thwarted, for at both ends their enemies had entered, and horsemen they knew but too well, were rushing upon them.

The scene that followed was a revolver duel at close quarters between a hundred men or more.

The Tigers of Texas, under their chief, fighting on foot, with what shelter they could find among the rocks, the mounted cowboys pressing them desperately.

Horses went down, saddles were emptied, the revolver shots rung in echoes among the rocks, resounding like a vast battle of infantry being fought, and the terrible war-cries of the Texans drowned the yells of the "Tigers" as they stood at bay and fought with the desperation of despair.

At last, seeing that the day was against him, the chief retreated with a few followers to the shelter of the caverns.

A half-dozen horses, some their own, others of wounded cowboys, had been received, and mounting, they made a dash, cut through the line and were away down the canyon at full speed.

The Tiger of Texas had again defied death, and ere pursuit was made, he and his few bold followers were far down the canyon, with night coming on to aid his escape, and leaving behind him in the cavern retreat a scene of carnage that showed how bravely had fought his lawless band when brought to bay.

The two clans of cowboys had met, the law-abiding, and the lawless, and the victory was on the side of right, though bitterly had the victors suffered.

Buck Taylor had again triumphed, but the Tiger of Texas was still at large.

CHAPTER IV.

UNLOOKED-FOR GUESTS.

IT was the morning after the battle in the Cavern Canyon.

The sun rose brightly over the range, and its rays fell upon the cattle of the old Mission Ranch being driven from the corral upon the hill to the prairies to feed, several cowboys being in charge.

Several hundred fine cattle, and a drove of three score of horses comprised the wealth of hoof of which Valerie Tracey could boast of being the possessor.

The ranch, snug, comfortable and trim in all its surroundings was a delightful home for that far border, and the beautiful young widow of the Texas Tiger seemed contented at least, if not happy in dwelling there.

As she paced to and fro upon the piazza surrounding the spacious log cabin, her eyes fell upon a group of horsemen far away upon the prairie.

It was a sight seldom seen in that land, unless it was a band of roving Comanches, and the Cattle Queen at once took a field-glass from a bracket and turned it upon the horsemen.

"There are a dozen of them, and they are upon the trail for my home."

"Yesterday I saw a large party of horsemen going along the range up toward the Cavern Canyon."

"What does it mean?"

So she mused aloud, and then, as she turned her glass again upon the horsemen, she continued:

"They are too far off yet for me to be sure, but if I am not mistaken, Buck Taylor the Lasso King is there."

"Why should he come here?"

Soon after, she stepped out into the yard to where there was a ruined tower of stone.

It had belonged to the old Spanish Mission, and in it hung a bell, deep-toned and ringing.

One, two, three strokes she gave upon it with a piece of iron, and the sonorous sound floated out over the prairie, reaching the ears of the cowboys guarding her cattle.

There were five of them, but three only left their herds and came at a gallop toward the rear of the ranch, the hill having shut off from their view the coming horsemen.

The sound of the deep notes of the bell also reached the ears of the strange horsemen, for they, too, quickened their pace from a walk to a rapid canter, and their way lay straight upon the trail to the ranch.

The woman, having given a call for three of the men of the ranch, stepped into the cabin and buckled around her slender waist a belt of arms, after which she drew on a gauzy jacket that completely hid them.

She looked very beautiful, this woman who had been an outlaw's wife, as she returned to the piazza, having placed upon her haughty, well poised head a sombrero richly embroidered with gold thread.

The three men whom the bell had summoned now rode up, two of them typical cowboys, the third worthy of more than passing notice.

To this one she said:

"Dagger Don, there come a party of horsemen, and at their head I recognize Buck Taylor, the slayer of my husband, while, if I mistake not, on one side of him rides Monte Joe the

gambler, upon the other Captain Hassan, the ranchero of Soldier's Retreat Ranch."

"Look for yourself."

She handed him the glass, for he had dismounted and ascended to the piazza and he turned it upon the strangers.

He was of fine appearance, physically and in face, though the latter was perhaps too reckless in cast and stamped with evil expression.

He dressed more as a Mexican *caballero*, than a Texan cowboy, wore a jeweled scarf-pin, and a diamond ring, while he seemed very anxious to at least appear like a gentleman ranchero.

Right in the center of his shirt, where his hand could clutch it quickly, was a jewel-hilted, ugly-looking, long-bladed knife worn in a scabbard, and this had given him his name of Dagger Don.

His face was dark, and though he spoke English perfectly he might well pass for a Mexican, for his Spanish was also perfect, and he had a way of speaking it at times.

"I remember seeing Buck Taylor once, señora, and I hope he will not recall that meeting if we meet now."

"Yes, that is the Saddle King, and also Monte Joe, for I also have met him."

"The third in the lead, riding upon Buck Taylor's right, I do not know."

"There are more of them than we can muster, even if I call in the two men on the prairie; but if they mean to be ugly you have but to give the signal, and we will begin the attack, which will be in our favor."

Dagger Don spoke in a way that showed that he meant no bravado in what he said, but would be as good as his words.

But Valerie Tracey was quick to say:

"No, no, there must be no trouble, Dagger Don, with these men."

"They are coming for some purpose, what, we shall soon know, and there has been trouble somewhere in this neighborhood, I feel sure; but if it is to search the ranch let them do so in peace, for they can find nothing here of Tiger Tom, as you know, and it is because his—his—well, shall I say *ghost*, has been seen by them, as by us, they are coming, believing him to be alive."

"But it will be strange, indeed, for me to meet face to face the man who slew my husband, and whom I cannot but like and admire, for such are our natures, I suppose."

"Now you and your men await at the corral, while I receive my guests."

"If I need you, I will give the signal."

Dagger Don bowed and walked away, leading his horse, while the men followed, and taking a seat in an easy-chair on the piazza, Valerie Tracey awaited the coming of the horsemen.

CHAPTER V.

THE TEST.

THE Cattle Queen was right in her surmise regarding the personality of the horsemen approaching her house, for the three in the lead were Buck Taylor, the Lasso King, Monte Joe, the gambler of Trail Crossing Settlement, and Captain Edward Hassan, the ranchero.

Those following were the Knights of the Rope, as Buck Taylor's men were called, and having beaten the Tigers of Texas in their lair, though their chief had escaped, they were on their way to the old Mission Ranch, to solve the mystery of how it was that the man they had believed to be dead was alive again, for now even Captain Hassan, who had pronounced Tiger Tom dead, his neck broken by Buck Taylor's lariat, was constrained to believe that he had been mistaken.

"Had I not seen the man with my own eyes, Buck, much as I have confidence in you and Monte Joe, I would not have believed that the man I pronounced dead could be alive," said the ex-army surgeon.

"We shall soon know all about it, at least, Captain Hassan, and if it is Tiger Tom or his double," said Buck Taylor.

"Or his ghost," remarked Monte Joe, with a smile, while he added:

"The grave will tell the story, and we will see if his beautiful wife is in the secret of his being alive or dead."

When the deep-toned notes of the old Mission bell pealed over the prairie, they quickened their pace, supposing that the Cattle Queen was calling help.

They rode rapidly on, and saw that three horsemen only answered the call coming in from the prairie.

Up the steep trail they rode, and as they neared the cabin, Buck Taylor, Captain Hassan and Monte Joe dismounted, throwing their reins to the nearest cowboys.

"Be ready men for a surprise," warned Buck Taylor in a low tone as the three walked on toward where the woman sat in her easy-chair awaiting their approach with the utmost calmness outwardly, whatever might be her inward feelings.

As they neared her she rose, and facing them, inclined her head in a stately manner, while she said:

"Gentlemen, I welcome you to Mission Ranch as my guests."

They were slightly surprised at this, for she

must have recognized Buck Taylor, he and the others knew, though her face and greeting did not reveal the fact.

So Monte Joe said in his pleasant way:

"I believe you recall me, Mrs. Tracey, and this gentleman is my friend Captain Hassan of Soldier's Retreat Ranch, while the other is—

"Captain Buck Taylor, the Lasso King, who killed my husband, Tiger Tom—yes, I recognize you, sir," said the beautiful Cattle Queen in an unmoved tone, turning her gaze from Monte Joe and Captain Hassan straight upon the face of the Cowboy Chief.

The Texan bowed, while his dark face slightly flushed and then paled, as he responded:

"It was the fortune of the war between your husband and myself, Mrs. Tracey, for him to meet with defeat, though not with death at my hands."

"Not with death, sir? What do you mean?" and all three noted the exceeding pallor that now swept over the face of the woman.

"Let me tell you just what I mean, Mrs. Tracey," and Buck Taylor's manner was earnest and impressive now.

"You know that your husband, as Tiger Tom, was a terror to the settlements, a desperado whom all feared, and that I was upon his trail with the proof that he was Thomas Tresscott, a murderer, robber and deserter from the—th Cavalry of the United States Army.

"I tracked him here, with my men, believing him to be the leader of a secret band of outlaws, and with no proof against his followers, we agreed to settle the affair with a duel between us two."

"You saw it fought, and I sent you his dead body, as I believed."

"For which you have my deepest gratitude," said the woman, in a low tone.

"I believed him dead, but, soon after, came word to me that his ghost had been seen."

"I traced that story, to find that he had been seen in Trail Crossing. Then a plot was formed to entrap him and his band."

"Entrap a spirit?" said the woman, with a sneer.

"No, flesh and blood—in fact, Tiger Tom himself."

"I say no, for right on that walk one night I saw his spirit form. Once again I saw it, and I know that he does not live."

"You are mistaken, Mrs. Tracey; he does live, and only yesterday we brought him to bay with forty of his men in the Canyon of Caverns, and though he escaped, with several followers, we almost annihilated his band."

"Do you speak the truth?" came in quivering words from the woman.

"Before Heaven I do!"

"Does he?" and she appealed to Monte Joe now.

"So help me Heaven, yes!"

"Do you say the same, sir?" and she turned now to Captain Hassan.

"Upon my honor, yes—the honor of a soldier!" was the firm response.

"Gentlemen," and the woman's form was trembling now, her voice in a quiver:

"I will only believe that my husband, Thomas Tracey, the man whom you, sir, call Thomas Tresscott, the man whom others call Tiger Tom, is alive, when I know he is not in the grave where I placed his body."

"Open the grave, and let it tell the story."

"That is just the proof I must have," said Captain Hassan, firmly.

"Then, with your permission, I can open the grave?"

"Yes, Buck Taylor, yes," was the earnest reply.

CHAPTER VI.

WHAT THE GRAVE REVEALED.

FINDING that the visitors were not upon a hostile mission, to her at least, Mrs. Tracey called to Dagger Don to come with two of his men, bringing spades and shovels, and then led the way to the grave of her husband.

"I have visited this spot nearly every day and night since I laid him here, and I will give no order to disturb the grave, so you must be the one, Buck Taylor.

"With the sinful life of my husband, as others spoke of him, staring me in the face, yet I loved him with all my heart and soul," and the woman's face revealed that she meant what she said.

Dagger Don approached the band of Cowboy Rangers gathered about the grave, with a free-and-easy air, though his eyes rested an instant upon the face of each man present.

Behind him came two of his men, bearing spades and shovels, and after raising his sombrero politely to the Cattle Queen, he said:

"Good-morning, pardons!"

All returned the salute, while Buck Taylor and Monte Joe particularly eyed him closely.

"What would you have me do, señora?" he asked, turning toward the Cattle Queen, at the same time glad to shield his face from the searching glances upon it.

"These gentlemen assert, Don, that my husband is not dead, but alive. They say that they fought him yesterday in Cavern Canyon, at the head of a band of outlaws, whom they killed or

captured, with the exception of a few who escaped with Tiger Tom.

"These they tracked to where they crossed the Rio Grande, and now they are here to prove that my husband does not lie in this grave."

Dagger Don listened with the deepest attention, and his face assumed an incredulous look as the woman spoke.

Then he said:

"The body of Senor Tracey will be found in the grave, senora; but that his spirit form has been seen you and I both know. What are your orders, senora?"

"I have none, but that gentleman, Captain Buck Taylor, will give you your instructions."

"You will please open this grave," said Buck Taylor.

"It would be better for you, senor, did the order come from some one else than you."

"Why so?"

"I am superstitions, and for a man to kill a foe and then dig open his grave, is a sign of life-long misfortune to him among my people."

"You are a Mexican?" asked Buck Taylor, in Spanish.

"I am, senor."

"Well, I am not superstitious, so will take all chances of bad luck falling upon me. Open the grave, please."

Dagger Don made no reply, but turned to the men with him and told them to go to work, when Monte Joe said:

"Take up the sod carefully, men, so that the flowers will not be much injured, and all can be replaced as before, if the grave is found to hold a body."

"I thank you, sir!" and the woman turned her glorious eyes upon the gambler with a look full of gratitude for his thoughtfulness.

The two men set to work, carefully obeying the instructions of Monte Joe, laying each sod to itself, so that the flowers were but little disturbed.

When this outer shell had been taken off they began to dig, and the work went on rapidly until at last solid ground was reached.

"This must be the body," said one.

"It is the bottom of the grave. There is no body there," Buck Taylor said, somewhat excitedly, showing more feeling than was his wont.

"Throw out all the dirt so there can be no mistake," ordered Monte Joe.

This was done, and one of the men said:

"We have struck bed-rock, that's sart'in."

"The grave is empty, madam, as you see; Tiger Tom, your husband, is not dead," and Buck Taylor turned his piercing gaze upon the face of the astonished woman.

And every other eye also sought hers.

And such an expression as rested there!

It brought pity to every heart, so full of grief it was at first, and then, suddenly changing, came the words:

"But he lives! my husband lives! He is not dead! not dead!"

No one spoke for a moment, and then back into her face rushed that despairing look, while she said in a low, pitiful tone:

"But, why has he deserted me? Why, if he escaped death, did he turn from me? He was buried in this grave, and here I have come to grieve over his death."

"How he escaped, God alone knows, for I do not."

"I believe you, Mrs. Tracey, for I am sure that you have never suspected that some one saved your husband from at last dying in this grave."

"If his was the semblance of death, it was as natural as death itself; but some of his followers suspected him of shamming, or believed him only to be stunned into unconsciousness, and so he was exhumed and rescued soon after being buried, the grave being again filled in. Such is my solution of the mystery," said Buck Taylor.

The woman made no reply; her breast was aching with grief that her husband had never let her know he had been restored and was yet alive, but had deserted her. Turning she walked slowly back to her forlorn home.

CHAPTER VII.

STILL A DOUBT.

"THIS settles all doubt, now, Captain Hassan," remarked Buck Taylor, as the woman walked away and he turned toward the ranchero.

"It certainly should do so, Buck, and it seems like stubbornness in me to still say that I believe the Tiger of Texas to be dead; but, after my examination of his body, after my discovering that his neck was broken, I can not believe that he was not dead."

"Then who was the man we saw at the canyon?"

"We have solved the mystery of this grave, that it holds no occupant, and now we must discover who this double of Tiger Tom is."

"You still so regard him, as Tiger Tom's double, not himself, I see?" said Buck Taylor with a smile.

"My stubborn brain will accept no other explanation, Buck. But, now, what is to be done?"

"I shall go to the canyon, and from there press on to Round-top Post with the wounded men, and the prisoners who await us there. You and Monte Joe will, of course, go with me."

"If you wish it, yes," answered the ranchero.

"I am at your service also, Buck," the gambler announced.

Dagger Don had followed the Cattle Queen from the grave, but now returned and said:

"The Senora Tracey begs that you gentlemen will be her guests as long as you are pleased to remain at the ranch, senors."

"Thank Mrs. Tracey for us, senor, and say that we have duty calling us elsewhere," Buck Taylor remarked, for he saw that neither Captain Hassan nor Monte Joe cared to accept the hospitality of a woman whom circumstances beyond their control had overwhelmed with a new sorrow.

The grave was then filled in by Dagger Don's orders, and as the Cowboy Chief and his party were turning away, he said:

"Have we not met somewhere before, senor?"

"Perhaps, senor, for your face is familiar to me, as well as your name, if you are Buck Taylor."

"I am, and I feel that we have met somewhere."

"And I have the same idea, that I have met you, senor," and Monte Joe spoke in the purest Spanish.

"I have passed much time in the States, senor," was Don's reply.

"And you were assured that Tiger Tom was dead?"

"So sure was I, senors, that one night the senora bade me wait with her and watch for the ghost of her husband."

"I had no fear then of the dead walking the earth, but what I saw sent me in terror away, while she fell in a swoon."

"This empty grave now tells me that it was Tiger Tom himself, we saw, and not his spirit."

"Why should he not have made known his being alive to his wife, who has been true as steel to him, bad as he was?"

"I cannot tell, senor; it is all a mystery to me beyond my fathoming."

"Well, we must be on our way, and I thank you for your kindness. Again thank Mrs. Tracey for us, and say that Buck Taylor hopes he will not have to again cause her sorrow or cross her path unpleasantly."

"I will, senor."

"Adios, senors!" and Dagger Don politely raised his sombrero as the party mounted and rode away.

Reaching the prairie, Buck Taylor, Captain Hassan and Monte Joe rode abreast of each other, while the trail was taken toward the Canyon of Caverns.

"Well, Monte Joe, what do you think now?" asked Buck Taylor.

"I would believe that Tiger Tom was alive but for the positive position taken by Captain Hassan that he is dead, so I am in a quandary what to believe, Buck," was the gambler's answer.

"Well, the captain's firm stand staggers me a bit, too, but the empty grave now convinces me that Tiger Tom was saved in some mysterious manner, and that I will have to run him to earth again."

"Do you think he will give you more trouble now?" asked Captain Hassan.

"Who?" queried Buck Taylor, with a smile.

"This man whom you say is Tiger Tom in the flesh and blood."

"I am sure he will."

"But his band is wiped out, except a few of them."

"True, Captain Hassan, over half of them are dead, and we have some fifteen prisoners, many of whom are more or less wounded."

"Then there are two of the band that I took to the fort as prisoners, and that leaves Tiger Tom very short-handed, unless he had more men than we gave him credit for having."

"But he seems to know Mexico well, and it will be no trouble for him to recruit his band there, and make a dash upon the settlements and ranches just when he is supposed to be no longer dangerous, so I would urge that you keep your cowboy scouts out on the watch, and your men prepared for a quick rally to protect your ranch."

"That I shall do, Buck, and I thank you for the suggestion."

"But will you take the trail of the man and those who escaped with him?"

"I shall endeavor to track him into his hiding-place in Mexico."

"Buck!"

"Yes, Monte!"

"I will go to the fort with you, then see Captain Hassan safely home, and once more begin my gambling life in Trail Crossing, so I can perhaps pick up news of Tiger Tom, or the man whom the captain here calls his double."

"As the men of the band are all branded, I shall keep my eyes open to discover one wearing the brand of the Star and the Tiger in the palm of his left hand, and if I do not wring from him the secret I would know then I am much mistaken."

"Perhaps I will take a run into Mexico, for I

speak Spanish perfectly, and might pass for a Mexican; so make no move in that direction yourself until you hear from me."

"All right, Monte Joe; but now, tell me if you believe that beautiful woman was acting a part to-day?"

"No, she was not."

"You think she knew nothing of her husband being alive?"

"I could swear that she did not."

"So could I, Buck; but I would not be so sure about that handsome fellow whom she called Don, and whom you and Monte Joe thought you had met before somewhere," Captain Hassan said.

"Yes, that struck me, too, captain, for I had an idea that he was not so surprised at finding the grave empty," was Monte Joe's remark.

"I also suspected that he knew more than he admitted, and I am sure I have met him before under circumstances in which he did not figure well, for his face made an unpleasant impression upon me," said Buck Taylor.

"Well, he will bear watching, and it will be just as well to keep an eye upon the fair mistress of old Mission Ranch too," Captain Hassan said.

And on they rode, camping for dinner at a spring and then going on to the canyon, where they found the cowboys all ready to move with their wounded and prisoners to Round-top Post.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN IDEAL HOME.

THE cavalcade reached Fort Round-top without adventure, and Colonel Forsythe, the brave and able commanding officer, heard the story of the Chief of the Cowboy Rangers and also of Captain Hassan and Monte Joe.

The colonel had known Captain Hassan when he was Doctor Ned Hassan, surgeon of cavalry, and that he and Monte Joe had met before was a fact, though the commandant said that there was a secret connected with the gambler which could not be made public.

The prisoners were safely secured, the wounded cared for, the band of the Star and Tiger being as tenderly nursed as were the Cowboy Rangers, for soldiers showed no partiality to a man in distress.

Then Captain Hassan started for his home, knowing that his wife and daughter would be anxious regarding him, and Monte Joe the gambler accompanied him.

The ranchero was surprised to see how thoroughly the gambler knew the trails, and there was much about the strange, handsome man that was most mysterious.

That he was a gentleman in spite of his calling went without saying, and his manners were courtly, his education and intelligence were of a superior order and his courage was undaunted, as had been proven on many an occasion.

The home of Captain Hassan was the most comfortable one on the border and unbounded hospitality always was to be found there.

Though known solely as "Monte Joe the Gambler," by Mrs. Hassan and Belle, they received their guest as an old and valued friend, and as they sat in the pleasant sitting-room that night, he it was who, at the request of Captain Hassan, told the story of their catching Tiger Tom and his men in the Canyon of Caverns, evidently ready to march upon some raid, and of the battle of the Clans that followed.

When he told of the escape of Tiger Tom, the visit to the old Mission Ranch and finding the grave empty, Mrs. Hassan said:

"Now, Ned, you can no longer believe that the desperado is dead?"

"Yes, I still have my doubts, Marion."

"And I cling to papa's way of thinking, for the man may have a double," Belle Hassan said.

"The man, as you have described him, is nearly seven feet tall, of a superb form, has a handsome face, and could hardly be mistaken for any one else," Mrs. Hassan persisted.

"True, and yet the thought that the one whom I knew as Tiger Tiger Tom is alive I cannot reconcile myself to believe," urged the captain.

"If he is alive he will be revengeful, and if the man who escaped is playing the part of Tiger Tom, we may expect trouble from him too."

"Wisely said, my daughter, and with such belief Monte Joe is to keep on the watch for any suspicious circumstances that may appear, while Buck Taylor and his men will also be on the alert, and my men shall be kept ready for the trail, and some of them constantly upon scouting duty, for I feel, somehow, that we have not heard the last of the Tigers of Texas, whether their old chief be living or dead," and Captain Hassan's manner was very much in earnest.

A few days did Monte Joe pass at Soldier's Retreat Ranch, for he knew well that he was welcome, and somehow this beautiful young daughter of his host had completely fascinated him.

Though a frontier girl, a wild prairie flower, he found her an accomplished woman, under the teaching of her refined and educated parents.

The Cowboy Clan.

She possessed accomplishments too for a life on the prairie as well as for the household, for she rode like a Comanche, was a dead shot and could throw a lariat with the most skilled rope-thrower on the ranch.

Then too she could follow a trail and had the courage of a man and a nerve of iron in danger.

Entrapped once when riding far from the ranch, by three of the band of Tiger Tom, who sought to kidnap her and hold her for ransom, she had been rescued by Monte Joe, and this had caused her to feel most kindly toward the gambler.

Then in her early life as a little girl, she had been captured by the Comanches, and rescued by Buck Taylor, who was also their captain, so that Belle Hassan had known the shadows of life, young as she was, and her experience had made a woman of her while yet a child.

She seemed to enjoy the society of Monte Joe, though she was just as cordial in her manner, if not more so, to Buck Taylor, when he visited them, while she was the idol of the cowboys upon the ranch.

And one night Monte Joe started upon his return to Trail Crossing, and Captain Hassan and his wife watched Belle closely as he departed, wondering if she cared for the handsome gambler more than as a friend.

The thought had also come into the mind of the fond mother as to whether Buck Taylor and Monte Joe were to be rivals, for she seemed to feel that both of them were most deeply interested in her beautiful daughter.

But Belle's face was unreadable, her thoughts were not visible upon her countenance, and she said, as though it was what he was to do, rather than of the man himself she was thinking:

"I wonder if Monte Joe will be able to find out the mystery surrounding the Tiger of Texas, papa."

If her parents had expected to discover the feelings of their daughter for the gambler, they were thus cleverly foiled.

CHAPTER IX.

THE FUGITIVE CHIEF.

THROUGH the darkness of night a band of horsemen rode rapidly, four of them following a leader who kept a few paces before the others, riding two abreast.

The gray glimmer of dawn began to lighten the prairie and hills as the horsemen descended from a range, and made straight for the Rio Grande, at a point where there was a ford.

As the light grew brighter with the rosy hues in the east, betokening the rising of the sun, the party of horsemen were seen to have ridden hard, for their horses were gaunt and travel-stained, while they had the look of being very tired animals.

The men were a wild set, bearded, wearing their hair long, dressed as Texas Cowboys and armed with a belt containing a pair of revolvers and a bowie knife.

It was the leader who would attract attention, though two of the men were wounded, one having a handkerchief tied around his head and blood-stained, while the arm of another was bound to his side, and the red sleeve showed that he had been hit hard.

The leader was mounted on a long-bodied horse, fully sixteen hands high, and in spite of carrying a very heavy weight in his rider he showed less distress than the other animals.

His rider was far above the average in size, sat his horse perfectly, and was a man to see and never forget.

Now his darkly bronzed face was stern and his eyes had an evil, threatening look in them, while his lips were firmly set.

He was none other than the man who had broken through the ranks of the Cowboy Rangers under Buck Taylor, and had made his escape with just half the men who had made the rush with him to go through, and two of the three were wounded.

The chief's left hand was thrust into his bosom, and the torn and stained sleeve showed that he too had been wounded, while there was a slight gash from a bullet in the neck of his horse.

But the man had made a bold dash for life and liberty, when he saw that all was lost, and had saved the one and gained the other.

He had hidden for awhile in the range, and later on had started on the trail for the Rio Grande, for once across the Mexican river he was safe, or so felt that he was.

The party rode into the river just as the sun peered above the hill-tops and the tired and thirsty horses thrust their heads down into the waters almost up to their eyes.

Having forded the stream, the horses being freshened thereby, the chief headed for a clump of timber some distance away, and throwing himself from his saddle he said almost savagely:

"Now we are safe, men, and woe be unto the Texas Cowboy that tracks us here."

The tired horses were staked out to feed, the men gathered some sticks to build a fire, and some venison steaks were broiled for breakfast, and eaten without bread or salt, for they had escaped without a baversack of food, and killed a deer that ran across their trail in the night.

After an hour's rest they mounted and pressed on once more toward a range of mountains, and a ride of a dozen miles or so brought them to a secure hiding-place which the chief seemed to know well, for he went on unerringly, though following no trail.

At noon they reached a mountain hacienda, and riding up to the door, a man came out and welcomed the chief, addressing him in Spanish.

The man was a Mexican, low-browed, evil-faced, and his piercing black eyes were cast furiously upon each face, as he said:

"The senior brings strangers to my house."

"Did I not tell you, Pablo, that I would soon return, and—"

"The senior said with herds of cattle, droves of ponies and horses laden with booty, for all of which I was to have a secure hiding-place ready."

"I have the retreat, senior, for cattle by the hundreds, and ponies by the score, where no man could track them, and a place where much booty could be hidden away; but not a hoof do I see, split or shod, not a pound of plunder, only you, chief, and four men who seem to have been badly used."

The man spoke in a sullen tone, and the eyes of the chief brightened as he fixed them upon him; but he kept his temper and said quietly:

"Pablo, I had gotten my men together for a raid; but we were surprised by the Cowboy Rangers and cut to pieces, so barely escaped with our lives, and only we five."

"Now, I had no other place to go but here, and you must drop your ill humor and care for me and my men, for three of us are wounded."

"When I am ready to again make a dash, I will take your advice, and Mexicans shall go with me as you urged, and you shall be well paid for all services you render me."

"Are you satisfied, Pablo?"

"These are but promises, chief."

"What else can I give you?"

"Gold!"

"I have [got to get it; but as you seem to doubt me, then I will seek another ally, yes, I will go to Acero, for he will welcome me."

"I said not that I would not care for you, senior, for I will; but I was disappointed at your returning empty-handed."

"Dismount with your men, senior, for you are welcome, and my daughter Anita will soon give you food and wine."

"By which trail did you come?"

"By the one you bade me take, where an iron-shod hoof leaves no trail."

"That is right, for you cannot be tracked here."

"You and your men are welcome, chief," and the Mexican quickly changed his ugly humor for one that was more cordial in tone and manner.

CHAPTER X.

ANITA.

THE man Pablo appeared to have been of the better class of Mexicans, for he used good language and there was that about him which revealed the fact that he had once been a gentleman, whatever he might have degenerated into.

His home was an abode one would hardly expect to find in a place so isolated, and about it were many indications of a refined taste, added to many real luxuries.

There were paintings on the walls, some furniture that had doubtless at one time graced a salon, and curtains hung at the windows.

In the rear was a court, and upon this the rooms opened, and beyond were quarters for the servants, of whom several were visible.

Entering the hacienda, the "Senor Captain Tracey," as he was called by Pablo, was greeted by a young lady of rare loveliness of form and feature.

She could scarcely be over eighteen, and her manners were refined and elegant, though upon her face rested a look of sadness which seemed to have been called there by scenes in her life which had brought her many a heartache, young as she was.

Her greeting of the American was most cordial, indeed, for she grasped his hand warmly and said in the sweetest of voices:

"I am most happy to welcome the Senor Captain again to our humble mountain home; but you appear to suffer, and your sleeve is stained with blood."

"Oh, senor! you have been wounded."

"It is but a slight wound, Senorita Anita, and your fair hands will soothe all pain if you will but dress it for me, for then I have a couple of wounded men to look after, as your father has kindly given them quarters in the wing of his hacienda."

"They shall have my attention, senor, and I will soon see that your wound is properly dressed."

"There is your room, Senor Captain, and I will soon return."

With this she glided away and the chief at once entered the room designated by Anita, and where he had before been a guest, for some months before he had come upon a band of lawless Mexicans who had kidnapped Pablo's beautiful daughter, believing him to be rich and hoping to force from him a large ransom.

Single-handed he had dashed upon the band of half-a-dozen men, and his desperate courage had

not only rescued Anita but put the kidnappers to flight, or rather three of them, for the others had fallen under the mad rush of the giant rescuer who seemed to know no fear.

He had escorted Anita to her home, and for two weeks had been Senor Pablo's guest, and in that time the two men had learned to know each other most thoroughly.

The fact was the Desperado Ranchero had read Pablo as a villain, and the two had concocted a scheme to work together for their mutual interests.

The Mexican had said he could gather a band for raiding into Texas who could be trusted and whom a small sum each would satisfy for their services.

But the American had said that he had a band of Americans under perfect discipline, formed into a league for self-protection and gain, and if Pablo could find a safe retreat for cattle stolen and booty, he could soon bring from across the Rio Grande enough plunder to enrich them.

"I am a fugitive from justice, Senor Pablo; but I am chief of the League of the Star and Tiger, and all I need do is to go and assemble my men and make the raid I spoke of."

"I am supposed to be dead, but so much the better for those who believe it, for the superstitious will regard me as a ghost, and already I have scared some people half out of their wits by showing myself."

Such was the plan formed, a compact was made, and Tiger Tom returned to Texas to organize his band of men for a raid upon the settlements and rich ranches.

The result the reader is acquainted with, and the Senor Pablo was angry at being thwarted from getting gold, for he had made the shining metal his idol, next to his beautiful daughter.

But he could not remain long in ill-humor with the man who had risked his life to rescue his idolized daughter, and so having taken the men to their quarters he returned to look after the Senor Captain.

He found Anita there with an old Mexican woman, dressing the wound of the chief, and so loaned his aid, for he seemed to have had some experience with wounds.

"A little more to the left, Senor Captain, and then your life would have been the forfeit."

"The revolver was well aimed," he said.

Anita had asked no questions as to the wounding of the chief.

She was not happy, for she suspected that her father led a lawless life there in his mountain home, and she knew that he was a fugitive from justice, for, a conspirator, against the Government, he had been forced to fly for his life, and into exile his wife had followed with their daughter, then fourteen.

The senora had died of a broken heart, two years after her coming to the hacienda, and the secret that had wrecked the life of her mother Anita knew, though she had never told her father so.

And there came this splendid-looking stranger, this American, to her home, having saved her at the risk of his own life, and she discovered that he too was lawless, one who was a fugitive from his native land.

It was a bitter, cruel secret for her to bear, and yet Anita intended to keep it locked in her own breast and suffer in silence, to feel that her father and the American stranger were both breakers of the law of the land.

CHAPTER XI.

A WOMAN'S RESOLVE.

AFTER the discovery which she had made, that the grave over which she had knelt, prayed and wept bitter tears, was empty, that her husband was not lying there, Valerie Tracey was almost crushed.

Her spirit seemed to be crushed within her, as she turned away from the grave and went slowly toward the cabin.

She appeared at first to be in a dazed condition, and not until she was joined by Dagger Don did she rally.

Then she recalled that she must at least be hospitable to the strangers within her gates, and she sent Dagger Don to bid them remain as her guests.

"They are not to blame," she muttered to herself.

And then came over her, with all its bitterness, the thought that her husband had deserted her.

The man whom she had so loved had not owed his rescue from death to her, but to some one else, and then he had shunned her, had held aloof from her ever since.

It came upon her in its full force that he was tired of her—had sought to desert her, and from a woman's standpoint this could but be for some one else, for another face fairer than her own.

This thought aroused the jealous demon in the woman's naturally confiding nature, it at once revived her spirits, and set her to thinking in terrible earnestness.

Suddenly she recalled that several times her husband had appeared before her, and she had regarded it as a fantasy of the brain; but now she knew it could only have been her husband in the flesh and blood.

The Cowboy Clan.

Why had he thus come to her except to alarm, or to show his indifference—perhaps his scorn?

Had he wished to prove to her that he was not dead, why had he not come in the broad glare of day, and told her that his life had been most miraculously preserved by some friend?

As he had not done so it seemed only the more evident that he had designed to frighten her when he had reappeared to her, and this but added to her bitterness.

So she at once determined to recall those visits to see if she could glean a ray of hope, and Dagger Don was sent for.

He came, ever quiet, dignified and most respectful.

"You wished me, senora?"

"I desire to talk with you Don, about the night we watched together the ghost of my husband."

"Yes, senora, and which we now know to have been the chief himself, not his spirit."

"Yes; he is alive."

"Assuredly, senora, as his body is not in the grave, and Buck Taylor and Monte Joe are not men to follow an idle fancy."

"You believe that they saw him in reality?"

"I know it, senora."

"How so?"

"I now know that we both saw him that night."

"It was light moonlight."

"Yes, senora."

"I sat here upon this piazza, just where I am now."

"You did, senora."

"It was the same as I saw him before, and so it was that I bade you watch with me. Now tell me where did you place yourself?"

"In that clump of trees, senora, near the gate."

"Tell me again just what you actually saw."

"I saw the chief come out of the shadow and slowly approach the house. He halted twice, yet looked straight before him, his hands hanging limp by his side. I still could not believe my sense of sight, so waited and he halted there within ten feet of me.

"I had my lariat ready to throw and yet for the life of me I could not raise my hand. Then he turned his face full upon me, and the moonlight revealed every feature distinctly. I endeavored to speak to him, but not a word could I utter, and then, seized with a sudden impulse I could not resist, feeling that at last I was face to face with a dead man appearing in spirit, I turned and fled like a deer."

"And I swooned away, and he was gone when I returned to consciousness."

"Now, that was Tiger Tom himself, Don."

"Surely, senora, it was no one else."

"And he did not make himself known to me?"

"No, senora."

"What do you understand by that?"

The man was silent and seemed ill at ease, so Valerie repeated the question, adding:

"Do not hesitate to speak as you think, Don."

Thus urged the man said:

"The truth is, senora, he must have decided to cut loose from his old home."

"And me?"

"It looks so, senora."

The woman closed her lips, while her eyes flashed viciously, and after awhile, she said:

"Well, it so looks to me, Dagger Don. He was saved from the grave by other hands than mine, and of late he has gone upon his orgies in the settlements oftener than was his wont, and against all of my influence.

"Once I could govern him wholly, but since his going into Mexico half a year ago I have not had the power over him I had formerly, and there is some reason for this."

"Then, escaping death as he did, he must have gone to Mexico, for certainly he could not have been in hiding here in Texas."

"Now he returns here, reorganizes his band, gets ready for a raid and leaves me out of his heart and his confidence."

"That cunning cowboy chief, Buck Taylor, was upon his trail, thwarted him, and he is again a fugitive, his band cut to pieces."

"I shall await just ten days for some word from him, for now he must know I am aware that he is alive, and if he does not come to me within that time, or send me a word of explanation, I will act for myself."

"And what would you do, senora?" asked the man, impressed by the strange look upon her face.

"I will become the Tigress of Texas, Dagger Don, and hunt down the Tiger, my husband!" was the savage rejoinder of the beautiful Cattle Queen.

CHAPTER XII.

THE FAIR PLOTTER.

THE hacienda of Ranchero Pablo, as he was known to the few who were aware of his existence and dwelling-place, had once been the home, many years before, of a very wealthy Spaniard, who, in exile from Spain, had settled in the mountains of Mexico.

He had built for himself and family a house that was more like a fort, for it was strong enough to resist a siege, and yet had all about it to make it comfortable as well.

In the valleys, appearing like basins in the mountains, was fine grazing land and water for cattle, and nature had so guarded them that a few men could mind a large herd, while their approach was such that no one would suspect their existence in the fastnesses of the wild range.

But the Spanish Don had died, several of his family had followed him, and the one who remained gave up the hacienda, selling it and its belongings to a padre, who intended making a Mission out of it.

But the health of the worthy padre broke down, and he in turn disposed of it to Senor Pablo for a small sum in cash.

Senor Pablo had been several times a guest of the padre while roving among the mountains, and seemed to be fond of the desolate locality and the old fort-like home, so was glad to get possession of it, with the few people who had once been the retainers of the Spanish exile.

Thither he brought his daughter, Anita, after he had dwelt there half a year or more, and she seemed to dearly love the old spot, and with her books, guitar, horses and rifle managed to kill time to suit herself, while her household duties also kept her well employed.

The senor, her father, was a morose man, but his life was wrapped up in his daughter, and she alone seemed to hold an influence over him.

But Anita had made a discovery, since coming to the hacienda, which had cut her to her heart.

She had been sent to boarding school in New Orleans, and there was supposed to be the daughter of a Mexican gentleman of vast wealth, for everything she could desire was given to her.

There she was known as Anita Bonabel, and yet when she was in her seventeenth year, and her father wrote her that he had lost so much money that he must bring her home, she had, upon reaching the City of Mexico, where she was to reside with a relative, been told that she was to bear the name of Anita Monon, the same as those with whom she dwelt.

This was Anita's first thought that all was not well with her father, and one night she overheard a conversation between two members of the family that told her there was a price upon the head of Pablo Bonabel, and that he never dared visit the City of Mexico.

A year after it was that Anita was taken by her father to live in the mountain hacienda, and though he made no explanation to her of his life of exile, of hiding, in fact, she felt very sure that "Senor Pablo" dared not even there be known as Senor Pablo Bonabel.

Such was the grief that Anita carried locked in her heart, for not once did she allow her father to know that she suspected him of being other than he pretended to be, a Mexican gentleman tired of society and companionship, and living a life of seclusion amid the solitudes of the mountains.

Feeling that Anita had no suspicion of the truth, Senor Pablo had been a little reckless perhaps in the life he was leading, and so it was that his daughter had been able to discover more of his mode of life than he would have cared to have her know.

When Tiger Tom, or, as he was known to Anita, Captain Tracey, had become an honored guest at the hacienda, through his services to the fair maiden, she had not been long in making the discovery that a bond of comradeship had been established between her rescuer and her father which had not been founded upon a basis of honor.

She had seen the American depart, feeling that he was going upon some expedition of danger and lawlessness, and when he returned, wounded and accompanied by a few followers who also showed that they had met with a dangerous foe, her heart ached bitterly, for she had begun to feel a deeper interest in this splendid-looking giant American, with his low, musical voice and fascinating ways, and yet who could be such a hero in deadly combat, as she had seen him when he came to her rescue against great odds.

The songs he sung to her, his light touch upon the guitar, his wit and intelligence, with a certain air of mystery, a certain constant looking back into the past always dwelling in his eyes, had won the young Mexican girl's heart, and it was a keen sorrow for her to feel that he was other than he seemed, a man living two lives.

The thought distressed her even more than the knowledge that her father was a fugitive from justice had done.

What her father's crime had been she did not know, nor was she aware of just what lawless acts he was then guilty of, or what he and Captain Tracey were allied in.

"I must win him away from this life he leads, or is entering upon, for why cannot one so noble-looking, so grand, at times so almost womanly in his tenderness, be all that he should be?"

"I will not despair, for I must win him away from sin," she said to herself after the coming of Thomas Tracey again to the hacienda.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PLOTTERS.

THOMAS TRACEY had been several days at the hacienda.

His wound was healing rapidly, and his men were getting along well.

Senor Pablo was a good liver his table was well supplied with all that could be desired, his guest found his room most comfortable and his host certainly was an agreeable companion when he chose to come out of his shell, so to speak, and make himself so.

Anita was a ray of sunshine in the hacienda, and the American watched her with the deepest interest.

He saw that she possessed an exquisite form, that her face was one of wondrous beauty and full of intelligence, while she had received a very good education.

She was light as a sunbeam, witty and talked well.

She had a voice of rare sympathy of tone, and in fact was a very dangerous young woman for a man with a heart to be thrown in contact with, whatever may be the ties that bound him elsewhere.

Then too he seemed to feel that he had a kind of a proprietary right in her, since his rescue of her.

So the days passed away at the hacienda, with hours spent in the saddle with Anita and Senor Pablo, in riding through the mountains, followed by rifle and pistol practice, and lasso-throwing, for Thomas Tracey believed in constant practice to "keep his hand in when he needed it," he would say.

The evenings were spent in either Tracey or Anita reading aloud, some music, and duets sung between the American and the Mexican girl, their voices blending well together.

Anita spoke English with just enough accent to make it attractive, and often the two talked together in that language, which Senor Pablo did not understand but very imperfectly.

After Anita had retired one night, some weeks after the coming of the Americans to the hacienda, Thomas Tracey said:

"Well, Senor Pablo, this is very delightful here, dreaming one's life away in idleness and pleasure, but I am well enough now to take the trail again, and my men are also."

"Well, Senor Captain, what is your wish?" asked the Mexican, quietly.

"To earn gold is the desire of my life, Pablo, and I have told you how it was to be done."

"It is hard for me to believe that there was a traitor among the men of the Star and Tiger League, of which I am chief, but it so happened that my movements were discovered, and that cowboy demon, Buck Taylor, laid a trap into which I went without the slightest suspicion of danger.

"Now I have four men with me, and though my band suffered terribly, there must have been fifteen or twenty prisoners taken."

"They have not the slightest proof against these men that I can see, that they have broken the law, and our assembling there can be urged as a protection against Mexican raiders, or a dash upon the prowling Indian bands seen about at that time.

"The result will be that they must release the prisoners, or if they do not, I must rescue them."

"Against myself I admit they have cause of quarrel, and had I been captured I would have been hanged, for I have already been sentenced to death."

"But I escaped, I have four men with me, and say four times that number are prisoners who must be rescued, so I can count upon twenty brave fellows, and perhaps a few more of the League who were not found by my courier to notify of our meeting, fortunately for them."

"So you still deem it best to have your own men under you, Senor Captain?" asked Pablo, who had listened most attentively to all that his companion had said.

"I rather feel safer in a raid."

"Well, I can gather for you twice as many brave Mexicans, who can assemble at the river ford some night, ready to cross and dash to a hiding-place wherein to rest the next day."

"The following night you can swoop through the settlements and ranches, sending off men with the cattle and horses as taken, and having pack-horses ready to load with plunder."

"By such a dash you could get a vast fortune in one night, retreat across the river before a determined pursuit could be organized, and there would be no Americans to betray your intentions and thwart you, only Mexicans ready to strike, rob and kill a Texan from hatred and gain alone."

"Do you see?"

"Yes, and I will take your men gladly; but I wish some Texans too, and we will compromise on the matter."

"How?"

"Well, I will send my men here back to Texas as spies, and to see if their comrades can be rescued."

"This done they can appoint a rendezvous where I am to meet them all upon a certain night."

"When I go, I will take your men with me,

so if there is treachery intended we will be strong enough to wipe out our foes.

"Then, all of us can make our raid, and I will have posted myself just where to strike."

"Through your men who may entrap you, Señor Captain?"

"No, through my own observation."

"Would you dare go into Texas alone?"

"Oh, yes, and I have work there to do, for I desire to return to my old home," was the reply of the American.

"You know best, señor, and you are the chief."

"All is in your hands," was Señor Pablo's response.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE KNIGHTS OF THE ROPE.

FORT ROUND-TOP having been a lately established post, nearer the scene of lawlessness, and as a greater barrier against Indian attacks upon the settlements, the men stationed there looked upon it as a good omen that some of the garrison should return victorious from their first war trail after arriving there.

Though not actual soldiers, the victors were known as "cowboy cavalry" and so called by the men in uniform.

They were enlisted as "Government herders," and being a splendid lot of fellows soon found other duties than guarding beef cattle.

They were proud to be called "Texas Cowboys," and knew the country perfectly.

They could follow a trail as well as an Indian, ride even better, throw a lasso unerringly and shoot straight to dead center every time.

A reckless lot of men they were, light-hearted, utterly fearless, generous, noble in their treatment of a friend or a fallen foe, and though feared by evil-doers and red-skins they were admired and respected by the soldiers and people of the settlements.

Better scouts were not be found, and so it was that these "Knights of the Rope," had, under the captaincy of Buck Taylor, come to be known as "Cowboy Rangers," and "Mounted Scouts."

It was this command of cowboy cavalry that came into the camp one morning with a number of prisoners, and their horses loaded down with wounded men, from their own ranks and their foes' as well.

They had left many dead behind them, in graves in the canyon, to attest the fury of the fighting; but they came back with a cowboy song of victory, and the wounded and prisoners having been turned over to the proper officer at Fort Round-top, those wild riders went to their own camp as light-hearted as ever, not in the least depressed by the thought that ere long it would be their time, perhaps, to bite the dust, and be laid away in their last resting-place by other comrades.

Their chief, Buck Taylor, had reported to the commanding officer of Round-top, Colonel Forsythe, the results of his going on the war-trail.

"But we discovered, sir, that I did not kill Tiger Tom in my lasso duel with him, for we saw him ourselves in the Canyon of Caverns, and he escaped us."

"We followed his trail to the Rio Grande, sir, but he had crossed, and so eluded us," the Lasso King had said.

"Then he will not dare venture back into Texas again, Taylor," said Colonel Forsythe.

The cowboy chief smiled dubiously, and replied:

"Yes, sir, he is not a man to give up or be frightened off, and though his band is almost wiped out, he will not be very long in again organizing, and then he will seek revenge."

"But do you think he can get the men after the lesson you have given them?"

"Yes, sir, there are men in Texas ever ready for any desperate undertaking; but should he not secure them here, we can look for him to come over at the head of a band of Mexicans even more merciless than Texan desperadoes."

"Then you expect to be on the watch for him, Taylor?"

"Yes, sir, for I have vowed to capture, or kill, beyond all dispute, Tiger Tom, and I shall be myself on the watch, with a couple of my best men, for any movement he may undertake, while Monte Joe will be on the alert in Trail City, and Captain Hassan keep his cowboys also on the lookout."

"It was strange that he even allowed his wife to believe him dead, for you seem sure that she did so."

"Yes, sir, there was no doubt of that; but his doing so convinces me that he is playing some deep game, and that game my Knights of the Rope have got to circumvent as best we can."

"Well, Taylor, I have every confidence in you, and feel that the looking after this outlaw chief is in good hands, and you can call upon me for all aid you may need, though I think your Lasso Kings are fully equal to the task."

"While looking after the return of this Tiger Tom, I wish you to scout around the Indian country and note what they are about, for they are too good of late not to be plotting some mischief."

"Yes, sir, I am always suspicious myself of

an Indian when he is on his good behavior," said Buck Taylor.

"Now tell me," continued Colonel Forsythe, "what is to be done with these prisoners?"

"Hang 'em, sir," was Buck Taylor's almost blunt response.

"Upon what charge, Taylor?" asked the colonel with a smile.

Buck Taylor was silent, and Colonel Forsythe repeated the question.

"Well, sir, as outlaws of Tiger Tom's band."

"They were found with that man as their leader, and doubtless are guilty members of some lawless league, Taylor, and yet individually and collectively we have no proof against them."

"They were without doubt preparing for some lawless raid, and every one of them may deserve hanging, and I believe do; but yet they were not caught raiding, burning ranches or running off cattle, and when you attacked them they fought back."

"Under these circumstances, I believe I can only frighten them by a short imprisonment and let them go."

"Well, colonel, you know best, sir, and if you do I'll be careful next time to catch them in the act of their villainy."

"I guess it would be best to let them go, as you suggest, and then I'll get a chance to bring proof against them when I again get them in my clutches," and Buck Taylor could not but see that the colonel was right, as the Tigers had only defended themselves against attack.

CHAPTER XV.

THE BLACK DETECTIVE.

THERE was no more popular man in the settlement of Trail Crossing than was Monte Joe the gambler.

He had a pleasant way about him toward those he met, was never known to get excited or nervous, whether the game was for life or death or for gold, and whether it went in his favor or against him.

His hand was ever ready to give to one in distress, he always sided with the under dog in a fight, and no man could say, no matter what the odds, that Monte Joe had been known to back down once he had decided upon the stand he would take.

Successful in seven games out of ten, he spent his money freely, lived on the fat the land afforded, helped the distressed, and was always the same, day or night, gambling or out for an outing.

News travels quickly, even where there are no wires or railroads, and the story of the battle of Buck Taylor's Cowboy Clan with Tiger Tom's band was soon known in Trail Crossing.

This proved to the most superstitious that Tiger Tom was not dead, and now it was said that he had made his escape from Buck Taylor and gone into Mexico.

There were men living in Trail Crossing who had suspected Tiger Tom of being the leader of a lawless band, and yet they had had no proof of it.

Living as he did upon the frontier, with the Rio Grande within sharp riding distance to the westward, and a chain of ranches to the eastward, and settlements, too, which were raided by Mexicans, it had been whispered that Tiger Tom was secretly an outlaw.

Who the members of his band were no one seemed to know, and yet the more observant among honest men in the settlement had noted the circumstance that before a raid of alleged Mexicans there was a thinning out of the worst characters in and about Trail Crossing, while soon after these very men would reappear and always have plenty of money to spend.

The place was now considerably thinned out, and many hoped that it would stay so.

Yet no one could discover who had been at the battle in the canyon that hailed from Trail Crossing, so it was not known whether any of the rough characters and tough citizens of that settlement had fallen there, or were then in the clutches of the Knights of the Lasso.

How the news reached Trail Crossing no one seemed to know exactly; but it had been told from lip to lip until it was asserted that Tiger Tom and a band of fifty men had been utterly wiped out by the Cowboy Clan, no mercy being asked or shown.

Then came the rumor that Tiger Tom and some of his men had made their escape into Mexico.

This implied, of course, that Trail Crossing would be well rid of him, for he would never dare to come there again.

One evening, just after nightfall, Monte Joe rode into Trail Crossing and went to the tavern stables, where he always kept his horse.

He was greeted with a shout of joy by Sambo, the negro factotum, and a—

"Bress de Lor', Massa Monte Joe, yer is safe and sound!"

"Yes, Sambo, I am feeling well, and in a good humor with myself and the world together."

"Is anybody about?"

"Me, sah."

"I mean besides yourself?"

"No, sah; all gone for de night."

"Well, Sambo, I have been off on a business trip, and am back again to stay for some time now."

"I is glad ob dat, sah, for it's lonesomer den a graveyard when you is gone."

"I am glad you think enough of me, Sambo, to miss me; but let me tell you now that I have certain duties to perform, and I believe I can trust you thoroughly."

"Massa Monte, I'd jist die fer you, sah, fore de Lor', I would."

"I believe you are my friend, Sam, and let me tell you that I have so much confidence in you that I am going to take you into my service."

"Bress de Lor'!"

"No, not that you must give up here, for you are just in the place I wish you; but I shall pay you double what you get here, and your duty will be to take note of every man who comes here, and of all you hear said among those who come."

"Yes, sah."

"You are to also try and discover, without having them suspect you, if any man has a brand in India ink in the palm of his left hand."

"I understand, sah."

"It is a brand of a Texas star in blue, with a red tiger in the center, and letters in the points of the star."

"Any man who has such a mark in the palm of his hand you are to note and let me know as soon as you can."

"That you can see me as often as possible, you had better look after my boots in my room every morning and come in the evening to see if I need anything."

"If I am gambling in the saloon at night, then you are to whistle outside, and I know how well you can whistle, Sambo, the old ballad, 'Massa's in de cold, cold ground.'

"You know it, do you not not?"

"Yas, indeed, sah, I does."

"It jest goes dis away," and Sambo broke forth in notes that a mocking bird might have envied.

"That is it, and never whistle it unless you need me, Sambo."

"I understands, sah, and I'll do as yer wants me ter."

"I know that well, Sam, and I'll pay you well for your services."

"Now look to my horses, for they have had a long jaunt of it."

"I guesses dey has, sah, for you hain't been away for nuffin'," ejaculated Sambo, as the gambler walked away toward the tavern.

CHAPTER XVI.

COCKTAIL TOM.

THE Lone Star Saloon of Trail Crossing was in full blast, when a couple hours after his return, Monte Joe entered it.

There were all of three hundred men there, and two-thirds of these were gambling.

The saloon was a large one, built of boards, one story high, and lighted by a score of swinging lamps by night, and as many windows by day.

There were two doors on the side toward the tavern, and one in the rear, and before this was the long bar, built of strong logs and very high, so as to serve as a protection; a breastwork for the barkeepers in case a "war" broke out in the assembly.

And a war there was of frequent occurrence, while the bullets imbedded in the logs showed the wisdom of the landlord in building up such a protection for his dispensers of drinks.

Thick glasses, which often served duty as weapons, and jugs were all that were used to ornament the bar, for to keep a mirror there was impossible.

Barrels of liquids were on tap out of sight behind the log fortification, and there was a "Head Bar Gentleman," as he styled himself, and six assistants.

Some reckless individual shad endeavored to criticise the natives in large letters put up behind the bar, and which read:

"Cards furnished by the Head Bar Gentleman on demand!"

"Don't shoot the gentleman behind the bar!"

"Gents will please not throw the glass a row."

"No shooting allowed without provocation!"

"Swearing forbidden unless a gent gets mad and can't help it."

"Ask and you shall receive!"

"Saloon open all day and all night!"

The "Head Bar Gentleman" having put the above notices up himself was jealous of any criticism regarding them, and no one but a stranger to Trail Crossing would now be guilty of making the attempt, for the frequenters of the "Lone Star" knew that "Cocktail Tom" had his own private burying-ground where he was glad to plant those who made themselves too curious about how he ran his affairs.

And "Cocktail Tom" by courtesy, Tom Talbot by name, was a character in his way.

He was the only man in Trail Crossing who always wore a "biled shirt," which being inter-

preted reads a white linen shirt nicely starched. He dressed in snowy corduroy pants stuck in well-polished boots, a velvet sack coat of navy blue, and a red velvet hat, showing that he was an American patriot by sporting the "red, white and blue."

His sombrero was of a gray hue, encircled by a band made of gold five-dollar pieces, and he sported a massive gold chain, a watch, diamond pin in the shape of a star, and a cluster ring of the same precious gems.

He wore a belt and in it were a pair of revolvers, worn out of sight however under his velvet coat.

His hair and mustache were of an almost carmine hue, which with his florid complexion were in strange contrast to a pair of very large, very brilliant black eyes.

Such was the "boss" of the Lone Star, and those who knew him voted him a good fellow, and no one could be found to say he was not a man of his word, and knew what fear was.

He had a comfortable seat behind the bar, in the center, under a lamp, and was wont to sit there and read a novel, unmindful of the noise about him; but if aught went wrong, Cocktail Tom was the first to know it.

Before him was a table, and it was known that he had a couple of repeating-rifles there, within reach of his hand.

In spite of his reading, he saw every man who entered, and just where he sat.

He knew them all, too, and just what might be expected of them.

Monte Joe had rented a table by the year, and it was in one corner of the saloon, on the same side as the bar, and no one ever played there except by permission of the gambler.

If Cocktail Tom gambled no one knew it, though he was an expert in all games of cards, and could decide any mooted question at once.

The men under the command, so to speak, of Cocktail Tom, knew their leader, and had confidence in him.

They were six muscular, level-headed fellows, expert as "gin-slingers," and knew how to serve a crowd, and manage one well.

They sought no quarrels, were not looking for insults, and silently and politely attended to their business, knowing that Cocktail Tom knew just when a "gentleman" should resent any insolence, and would give them the hint.

Before each one's stand was a repeating-rifle and a pair of revolvers, not visible to the crowd, but awful handy for their use if needed.

They were on duty three-fourths of the night, when they would be relieved by three "day men," who had much less to do, except when Trail Crossing had some extra cause for excitement, and then perhaps the whole force would be on for twenty-four hours.

The Lone Star was a gold mine to the owner, who was the landlord of the tavern, and Cocktail Tom, the latter holding a half-interest, and being full manager, and his partner had always found him to be square in all his dealings with him.

Since the report that Tiger Tom had not been killed in his duel with Buck Taylor, and then that the Desperado Ranchero and half a hundred of his men had been trapped in a canyon by the Cowboy Clan, Trail Crossing had been a scene of excitement, all of the settlers gathering in the saloons to learn more news if possible.

It was in the midst of this excitement that Monte Joe the gambler quietly entered the Lone Star Saloon the night of his return to Trail Crossing.

CHAPTER XVII.

MONTE JOE'S RETURN.

THE first one to see Monte Joe when he entered the saloon was Cocktail Tom.

Now, he was fond of the gambler, and the absence of Monte Joe had worried him considerably, as he was not sure where he had gone or what had become of him.

He knew that, popular as Monte Joe was in Trail Crossing, he had foes, for the gambler had resented insults upon the defenseless, and on a number of occasions had boldly defied the worst element of the community, and he was vulnerable to the bullet of an assassin, and Cocktail Tom dreaded that he had been ambushed and killed.

When the gambler was there he knew that he had a firm backer in running his saloon against all odds, and then Monte Joe would allow no sharpers to impose upon the innocent players and this fact alone brought many people to the place to indulge in a game of chance.

Cocktail Tom was reading a very interesting novel, yet his eyes were raised constantly upon the door of entrance as it opened and shut, and he beheld Monte Joe.

Instantly his voice rung out:

"Welcome back, Monte Joe, to Trail Crossing!"

This outburst from the usually serene Cocktail Tom turned every eye upon him, and in the direction that he was looking.

All beheld Monte Joe, his handsome face wearing a smile as he strode toward the bar and held out his hand to Cocktail Tom who grasped it warmly.

"Tom, serve the crowd with drinks and

cigars, for I pay the score," said the gambler, and a wild burst of applause greeted him while many pressed around to grasp his hand, and innumerable questions were asked as to where he had been and if he had heard the news of his friend Buck Taylor having wiped out the band of Tiger Tom?

"Yes, I did hear something of the kind; but have you any news about it you can tell me, Tom?" he asked.

"We only know that Tiger Tom is not dead, Monte Joe, and had gotten an outfit together for some mischief, when Buck Taylor and his Lasso-Throwers ferreted them out and it is said killed about half and captured the balance."

"Tiger Tom too?"

"I guess so, for I heard no one escaped."

"Then Tiger Tom will be hanged of course by the military," coolly said Monte Joe, and as drinks had been served all round he continued:

"Your very good health, gentlemen all."

The toast was drank with three cheers for Monte Joe, who merely touched his lips to his glass and set it down.

"Any big games on, Tom?" he asked.

"No, I believe not while you have been away, though there is a stranger here to-night who has been playing big money."

"Who is he?"

"He sits over yonder by your table, Monte Joe."

"Ah! I'll go over and see if I can interest him."

"Any news?"

"None, more than this fight of the cowboys with Tiger Tom and his men, whoever they were."

"Have you been to the river settlements, Monte?"

"I've been on a regular round-up, Cocktail Tom."

"Hope business was good."

"Excellent, for I was winner in one of the largest games I ever played; but you do not know the stranger over by my table?"

"Never saw him before that I remember."

"I'll see if I do."

With this Monte Joe sauntered leisurely over toward his corner, stopping here and there to shake some friendly hand that dropped the cards to grasp his own, and to have a pleasant word with some who spoke to him.

He reached his table, took his favorite seat in the corner, so that he could face the whole room, and glanced over the faces nearest him.

There was one man who sat with his profile toward him, and he was busy with three others at a game for big money.

The stranger had drawn the brim of his sombrero down over his face, so as to half hide it from the gambler, yet Monte Joe felt sure that he had met the man before.

Just then the stranger raked in the money on the table before him, he having won straight along, and one of the players called out:

"I cry quits!"

"I'm bu'st'd," said another.

"You've got me down to hard rock, pard, but it's my idee you play a stealin' game," said the third, and his revolver was in his hand as he spoke, and the stranger, evidently caught off his guard, as he did not expect such an ending of the game, was covered by the weapon.

"I am not a cheat, pard, and if I had a friend here you should not insult me with such a charge," said the stranger in a voice that trembled, while his face became deadly pale, for he seemed to realize what was before him.

"I says you is a cheat, man, and you has gotter give up every dollar yer has won from we three, or I sends a bullet inter yer brain."

"Come! no chin music, but count out yer dust, or I lets ther lead fly."

"I can but yield, where the odds are against me," and the stranger thrust his hand into his pocket for the money.

"And that hain't all, for we is purifyin' ther morals of Trail Crossing, and it is our duty ter every sharper we catches cheatin', and I knows yer ter be a card thief, and we'll elevate yer! won't we, pard?"

A perfect roar of assent came to this murderous proposition of Gentle Jack, whose blustering manner and fog-horn like voice had gained for him a sobriquet just the opposite of what he was.

The stranger's face turned to an ashen hue, for he knew what a frontier crowd was, and he cast his eyes appealingly around him.

But not a look of sympathy met his glance, and he felt that he was doomed, as the whole crowd had pressed about the table now.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A TEST GAME.

"ONE word, please, gentlemen."

The voice was as ringing as a bugle, and all heard the politely-uttered request.

It brought silence in the throng, and caused six hands, laid heavily upon the shoulders of the stranger, to be lifted simultaneously.

"Pardon me for crowding, gentlemen."

It was the same voice, and the crowd, a moment before so excited, grew calm, and gave the speaker room.

It was Monte Joe, and he had forced his way

to the side of the stranger, and now stood facing his accusers.

"What reason have you, Gentle Jack, for accusing this stranger of cheating you?" he demanded in his quiet way.

"He's won several games straight along, and he raked in as many last night."

"And I ran once here thirty-three consecutive winning games, as all of you know, some months ago; but do you accuse me of unfair playing, Gentle Jack?"

Not a word was heard, all breathlessly awaiting the answer.

Gentle Jack was known as an inoffensive man generally, but a terror when in drink and armed.

He had evidently been drinking now, and was in an ugly mood, and he was a dangerous man at such times, for he was game and a dead shot, while he possessed a strength far above the average of most men.

He shook his head like an angry steer at Monte Joe's question, and made no reply.

"Answer me, Gentle Jack."

"What's yer question?"

"Do you say that I would cheat because I won thirty-three consecutive games?"

"You has not been accused of it, Monte Joe."

"Then why accuse this stranger?"

"Is that your business, Monte Joe?"

"Yes."

"How does you make it out?"

"I live here in Trail Crossing, and because a stranger comes here and plays, unless he is guilty of cheating, I do not intend he shall be accused of so doing, and be robbed of what he has won."

"Who has robbed him?"

"You intended to do so."

"Does yer say that o' me, Monte Joe?"

"Yes—hold on! you are not quick enough to draw on me, Gentle Jack, for I have you covered, you see," and Monte Joe was so much quicker in drawing that the hand of the other had not left his belt before the muzzle of the gambler looked squarely into his eyes.

"Now take your hand off that revolver, and fold your arms—quick!"

Gentle Jack obeyed in silence, but his look spoke volumes.

"Now let me say to you that this stranger shall not be robbed, but if he is a cheat I will be the first to let him be punished."

"I have watched him for some time, and I know that he has played a square game."

"You lost, got angry and were determined to get your money back at the cost of this man's life."

"You say you are broke, you and your friends who have been playing against him, and so I will stake each one of you with the amount he has won from you."

"How much was it?"

"I lost three hundred, Monte Joe," said one.

"I go that fifty better," the second one said.

"And you, Gentle Jack?"

"I hain't asking you to lend me no money, Monte Joe."

"See here, Gentle Jack, just let me say this to you, and I mean every word of it."

"Well?"

"You have accused this stranger of cheating, and but for my interference, ere this you would have had back your money, and he would have been hanging to a tree outside a dead man."

"Now I will lend you the money you say you lost to play against him, and you, who profess to be a fine card-player, win the best three in five, playing for your comrades here too, as well as yourself, then you get back your money."

"If he wins, then I am the loser, and all can see the game he plays."

"I refuses."

"You have no right to refuse."

"I takes it."

"You have publicly accused him of cheating, and you must give him satisfaction, or—"

"Or what?"

"Or I'll give you ten minutes to leave Trail Crossing and no more."

All drew a long breath at this.

Monte Joe had "chipped in" with a vengeance, and all who knew him felt that he made no idle threat.

Gentle Jack looked ugly, and he was about to refuse again, all could see, when Cocktail Tom stepped up and said:

"Yes, Gentle Jack, play the test game Monte Joe proposes, or travel and I'll be hot on your trail, for I shall protect my guests, be they home folks or strangers."

"Let me add," quietly said Monte Joe, "that if you consider yourself insulted by me, I am wholly at your service after the game, Gentle Jack."

"Then I plays the test game, so put up yer money for us ter play with, or shut up, Monte Joe," was the savage rejoinder of Gentle Jack.

CHAPTER XIX.

MONTE JOE'S "SIX ACES."

THE stranger, who was the "bone of contention," had not moved in his seat or uttered a word while the conversation was going on, which his luck at cards had occasioned.

Now, as Monte Joe drew out his money he said:

"Pardon me, sir, but while I thank you for your kind offer, I will return these men their money, three hundred to one, three fifty to another and five hundred to that man who accuses me of cheating him."

"Then I will stake a like amount against the sum total and play him the best three in five to win or lose."

A murmur of applause greeted this square proposal, but Monte Joe said:

"But if you win you will be only winning back what is yours, while if you lose you will have to give up what you had already won."

"True, but if I win then you lose if you put up the money for these men."

"That's so!" shouted a score of voices in chorus, and Cocktail Tom said:

"See here, Gentle Jack, you have got more money, and so have your two pards, Holcomb and Swett, so you must put up to prove your words against the stranger, for money talks and I for one won't see Monte Joe lose it, if he has to."

"That's square," shouted the crowd.

"I hain't got no more money with me," said Gentle Jack.

"Give me your I O U, and I'll cash it for all of you," said Cocktail Tom.

The three men had money laid up, if not with them, and they were well aware the crowd knew it.

The three were partners in the charges against the stranger, and they felt that they could not back down from the test game.

So Cocktail Tom ordered pen, ink and paper brought, wrote out an I O U for the separate amounts, the sum total being eleven hundred and fifty dollars, and placed it before the men to sign.

Then he tossed the money upon the table and said, shortly:

"Now, go ahead, Gentle Jack, and you and the stranger are both under a hundred pair of eyes, and cheating in the Lone Star Saloon means hanging outside, with not ten minutes for prayer."

A yell greeted these words, and some one in the crowd called out:

"Judges! Judges!"

"Who do you wish?" asked Monte Joe, quietly.

"You be judge for Gentle Jack, and Cocktail Tom for the strange pard," said a voice, and a cheer showed that this was satisfactory.

"And if there's a tie?" asked one.

"If the judges tie in an opinion, a vote of the crowd can settle it," said Monte Joe, and his words were greeted with a yell of entire satisfaction.

"I am ready, gentlemen, and here is my money, eleven hundred and fifty dollars," said the stranger, whose face had regained its color now, while he was perfectly cool.

Gentle Jack put his money up, also, a fresh pack of cards were ordered by Cocktail Tom, and brought, and then the judges each took their stands behind their respective men, while the crowd were ranged on each side, and so that no one else could see the cards of the players.

All saw that the stranger handled the cards most deftly, and was a keen, clever player.

His face was emotionless, he was silent, a glance showed him his hand, and then he watched for his adversary's play, and was quick to take advantage of its weakness, or meet its strength in a good lead.

The first game was the stranger's, and Gentle Jack scowled, and it was reflected upon the faces of his two fellow-losers in the other games.

The second game was also the stranger's, and he said:

"To show that I mean to be fair, and depend only on luck, I am willing now to make it best five in seven."

"I doesn't ask no favors, nor want none," growled Gentle Jack.

The hands were about to be dealt, when the stranger again said:

"Well, after you pick up your hand and look at it, I'm willing to change with you."

"I'll tell you when I sees the hand," was the sullen reply.

"All right."

The cards were dealt, and all eyes looked upon the face of the stranger to see there what he held.

But his face was emotionless, and Cocktail Tom who stood behind him showed no sign whether the hand was good or bad.

As for Gentle Jack, his face grew darker, and in an ugly tone he said:

"Give me your hand now, if yer dares."

The stranger placed his cards upon the table and shoved them toward him.

The eyes of the crowd looked to Monte Joe's face to reveal the situation, but they might as well expected to find it revealed in an iron mask.

Gentle Jack's face slightly brightened, and he drew three cards from the pack, discarding three.

Then his face grew brighter still.

The stranger also discarded three, and drew

as many, but what he got his countenance failed to disclose.

But the suspense was of short duration, for the stranger threw down his hand with the quiet question:

"Can you beat four aces, pard?"

"Curse you, not but I trump the hand of that meddling gambler, and—"

The words and movement were unexpected, and a revolver had been drawn to cover Monte Joe, as Gentle Jack spoke.

But he never finished the sentence; as quick as was the gambler was quicker, a shot rung out and Gentle Jack fell forward upon the table a dead man.

"I held six aces," coolly said Monte Joe, as he cast his eyes upon the two comrades of Gentle Jack to see if they intended to carry on the war against him.

CHAPTER XX.

THE STRANGER.

ALL present had seen the quick movement of Gentle Jack, and yet not one felt that he could prevent the certain death of Monte Joe at his hands.

The man had a tricky way of catching one off his guard, and he had done the same with the stranger after their first game of cards.

Monte Joe had promised him satisfaction, and he had meant to get it with a vengeance.

But somehow the gambler was quicker than the man who sought to kill him, lightning-like as had been his movements.

Monte Joe knew there was no mincing matters, he had no time to call hands up, and it was kill or be killed.

So he drew trigger, and was then ready for the friends of Gentle Jack if they meant to attack him.

"Come, men, if you intend to attack do it openly now, and not from ambush."

"I still have five aces in my hand to play."

Monte Joe spoke with the utmost sang froid. He saw the man he had slain lying half upon the table, and these others might open upon him; but he was wholly unmoved.

As neither spoke, he continued:

"Well, you are wise, as I now see that my stranger friend held you covered."

"I thank you, sir," and he turned toward the stranger who had his eyes upon Gentle Jack's two pards, who had attempted to draw, doubtless intending to open upon Monte Joe.

"We hain't got no quarrel with you, Monte Joe," said one.

"No, Gentle Jack were our loved pard, but he fetched his death onto himself, for he were a fooler play a hand ag'in you, Monte Joe," the other replied.

"Well, men, bury your friend decently, and I'll pay all expenses."

"I am sorry be forced me to kill him, but then it was his life or mine."

"Let me be sure that he is dead, however."

He raised the left hand and placed his fingers lightly upon the pulse.

"Yes, he is dead," he said quietly, while he muttered:

"I thought I was not mistaken, for he wears the brand of the Star and Tiger in his left palm."

"I must keep my eye on the other two."

Then turning to the stranger he said pleasantly, as though wholly dismissing the tragedy from his mind;

"Would you like to play me best two in three, pard, for your last winnings?"

"Certainly, sir; but I warn you that I am a very lucky man."

"So I have seen; but so am I," and the two went over to Monte Joe's table in the corner, the crowd, now deeply interested in the stranger, following to see if he was a match for their favorite Monte Joe.

They took seats and the game began, when the stranger had placed upon the table the eleven hundred and fifty dollars he had won from Gentle Jack, and Monte Joe had matched it with a like sum.

The first game went to the stranger, and Monte Joe smilingly said:

"Your luck thus far has not deserted you, sir."

"Not thus far: but you are a bold and clever player."

"I never saw a man handle cards more cleverly than you do, sir."

"Thanks, and it is a coincidence that I was just about to make the same remark about you."

Each was a splendid hand at cards, and the pasteboards seemed to recognize that they were in master hands.

The crowd looked on with breathless interest and a sigh of suppressed excitement was heard when Monte Joe was the winner of the second game.

"The next game decides," said Monte Joe with a smile.

"Yes, so it does," was the smiling response.

And the next game was won by Monte Joe, who threw down four aces upon the table.

"You are partial to aces, sir," said the stranger without the slightest sign of regret at his loss, and he handed over his winnings to his adversary.

"Yes, they seem to be my luck cards, for I win oftener with them than with any other."

"Will you play again, sir?"

"No, thank you, for I have had enough excitement for this evening and I never willingly put my nerves to too severe a strain."

"Will you join me in a glass of something, and, gentlemen, I will make the invitation general?" and he glanced over the crowd.

But Monte Joe quickly looked over to where he had last seen the body of Gentle Jack, and observing that it had been removed, said:

"Pardon me, sir, but you, and all of my friends here drink with me, for I am the winner."

The stranger urged, but Monte Joe was firm, and, when all were served, he again only touched his lips to the glass.

But he noticed that the stranger did the same, not even sipping the liquor.

"I thank you, sir, for the service you have rendered me, and will bid you good-night, for I leave at dawn."

"Thanks are but a slight token of gratitude for saving one's life, but I mean what I say when I tell you that I am your friend."

"Good-night, sir."

"Good-night, Dagger Don," and the name came from the lips of Monte Joe in a tone so low that the stranger only heard it.

But it told him that the gambler had recognized him.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE DEBT CANCELED.

MONTE JOE remained for half an hour longer in the Lone Star Saloon, chatting with Cocktail Tom over at his table.

He seemed not to care to play more, and pleading fatigue at last bade Cocktail Tom good-night and started for the hotel.

There was a clump of timber to pass through, the way he went, and he had had cause to remember the spot well, for once he had been waylaid there, and, though mounted, had shot down his intended assassin.

It was the very spot for an ambush, for a man could fire upon a foe, and then dashing away under cover of the timber reach the river and easily make his escape in the darkness before pursuit even could be started.

Whether the remembrance of that night was called up by what he had recently passed through made Monte Joe cautious or not, certain it was that he was on the alert for a foe.

And yet he was considerably surprised to hear a shot, then another overhead, and behold a form fall almost at his feet and lie all in a heap, and motionless, though he had his revolver covering it instantly.

The moon was well on the wane and had risen but half an hour before; but it gave light enough, streaming through an opening in the trees, to reveal the motionless form in the path and the gambler with his revolver leveled at it.

But following the shot and the fall came the words, almost instantly:

"It's all right, senor, for I fired before he drew trigger; but I hope his bullet did not hit you."

The voice came from up in the tree, and Monte Joe, not in the least disconcerted, replied:

"I am not hurt, but it is Holcomb, is it not?"

"Yes, senor, one of Gentle Jack's pards."

"And I recognize your voice as that of my stranger friend."

"Yes, I am the one you saved to-night from being hanged," and with this the man dropped from the tree into the path, just as men came toward the spot, from the saloon and the tavern, alarmed by the two shots, for the firing of a pistol in Trail Crossing almost invariably sounded the death knell of some unfortunate.

"Well, my friend, you have canceled the debt you owed me, for this man meant to kill me and would have done so but for you."

As the crowds now came up at a run, the gambler said:

"Pards, you will recognize in this man at my feet Holcomb, the pard of Gentle Jack."

"He climbed that tree to ambush and kill me on my way to the tavern, and my stranger friend here can explain the rest, I guess, for he saved my life."

The crowd gave the stranger a cheer and called upon him for an explanation of the situation.

He gave it in a very few words and with a manner not in the least flurried.

"I left the saloon, gentlemen, for the tavern to get some rest before going on my way, and stopped here to see the moon rise."

"I also saw two men approaching, and right in a line with the moon, I thought I recognized my two friends in the game with me to-night."

"I do not know what caused me to do so, but quick as a flash I sprung up, seized that limb and drew myself up into the tree."

"The men came on, halted in the path and began a discussion as to the best means of killing Monte Joe."

"From what I saw and heard they agreed to toss up to find out who should do the work, and it fell to this man."

"The other said he would wait in the boat on the river, where their dead friend, Gentle Jack,

had been left, for they were taking him to their cabin across the stream.

"With this he gave Holcomb a lift up into the tree and walked away.

"The man perched himself where I could see him distinctly, though I was in shadow.

"And so we waited until a man came in sight.

"It was not Monte Joe but a negro, one who stays at the stables I think.

"Next came a small man walking briskly, and the third was Monte Joe.

"I saw this man at our feet rest his revolver upon a limb and take good aim as his victim approached, and when I dared wait no longer I fired.

"The shock, as my bullet struck him caused his finger to pull trigger also, but his bullet went wide and he fell from the tree into the path."

"You are sure he's dead and not playing 'possum?" said one.

"Oh, yes, I shot to kill and I never miss," was the cool reply, yet uttered in no spirit of braggadocio.

"Served him right," cried one.

"Just what assassins sh'd git."

"Yer is a trump, pard, and I hopes yer'll hang out in Trail Crossin'."

"Come back and hev a drink with us."

"Yes, let us have a night of it."

"We'll drink to ther clearin' out o' two bad men this night."

But further observations from the crowd were cut short by the gambler, Monte Joe, who said:

"No, pard, my friend will go with me to the tavern now, and I will ask you to look after this body and I will pay the score of burial.

"As for Swett I guess he's suspicious by this time that Holcomb's plan went wrong and you'll find him at his cabin with the body of Gentle Jack, so carry him his other pard to bury, please."

"Good-night, gentlemen," and taking the arm of the man who had so quickly canceled his life-debt to him, he led him on toward the tavern, while he said in a low tone as they got out of earshot of the crowd:

"Come to my room, for I wish to have a talk with you, my friend."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE TALK.

MONTE JOE led the way through the office of the hotel straight to his rooms, for he had two.

They were at the end of the wing, upon the second floor and were the pleasantest in the tavern.

One would not have expected to find such evidences of comfort in that frontier tavern as the rooms of the gambler exhibited, for they were really most comfortable.

Then, too, one would not have looked for such evidences of refinement as on all sides were visible in the rooms of one who was known simply as Monte Joe, the gambler of Trail Crossing.

There were books, and many of them were books that only a man of a deep thinking mind would read.

A guitar, bugle, pair of foils, a sword, an elegant Mexican saddle and bridle not yet used, some rifles, a shotgun and revolvers, with a Mexican lasso and some Indian weapons and costumes were the furnishings of the room.

There were a couple of easy-chairs, a lounge, writing table and a bed, with silk smoking-cap, dressing-gown and slippers showing that the gambler was fond of luxury in his resting hours.

"Sit down, senor, and let us talk in Spanish, for if overheard we cannot be understood, as two men I know occupy the next room and they cannot even talk English.

"You will find that a comfortable seat, senor," and he motioned to one of the awning chairs, after which he got out of a cupboard a decanter of old whisky and a box of Havana cigars.

"Help yourself, senor, for both are good, and this is the only time I take a drink when in Trail Crossing, after I retire to my room for the night."

The visitor took a glass of whisky, with the air of one who knew good liquor when he saw it, lighted a cigar, and said abruptly:

"You know me, senor?"

"Yes."

"As whom?"

"Dagger Don."

"You recall where we met last?"

"Oh, yes, at the old Mission Ranch, the home of Mrs. Tracey."

"You have a good memory, senor, and piercing eyes."

"Why so?"

"When last we met I was in cowboy dress, had a beard and long hair, while I was a Mexican."

"Yes, and you have shaved off your beard, cut off your long hair, put on a corduroy suit and slouch hat, and tried to appear to be a comparative stranger in Trail Crossing, while now, I suppose, you are an American?" answered Monte Joe, with a smile.

"Well, senor, I confess I did not care to be

known, for I am now on a little secret service work."

"A detective?" said Monte Joe, with something akin to a start of surprise, something he was very seldom ever guilty of.

"Well, a self-constituted one, senor, as I do not mind confessing to you, for I consider that we may be called friends now."

"You see I am the manager, as it were, of Mrs. Tracey's ranch, and after your visit to her, when the secret of the grave was revealed, she became so unhappy at the thought her husband had been alive, and so held aloof from her, for she loves the man with her whole heart and soul, senor, that I told her I would make a tour of his haunts, to see if I could discover any one of his men who could tell aught about him.

"I came to Trail Crossing first, and intend to take in the other settlements and camps, sir, and perhaps go into Mexico.

"That is just the situation, senor."

"I see, but why should you come in disguise?"

"Well, senor, I am known to some as being one of Tiger Tom's men, and they are decidedly under a cloud now, and so I cared not to appear as what I really was."

"You knew me, for instance, and I saw the day you were at the Cattle Queen's Ranch you were suspicious of me."

"I confess I thought you knew what perhaps the Cattle Queen was in ignorance of, that the chief was alive."

"No, senor, I believed him dead, and seeing him one night, when his wife bade me wait his coming, I did so."

"He came, and wholly an unbeliever in ghosts, I yet was so frightened at seeing what I could only believe was Tiger Tom's spirit, that I fled from the spot."

"It upset all my ridicule of ghosts, and I was very glad indeed to find that he was alive and that I was a fool."

Monte Joe regarded the man searchingly.

He seemed to be wholly honest, his explanations were sincere, and besides they seemed beyond cavil, and yet as a dweller at old Mission Ranch he could not but feel some suspicion regarding him.

Then too he was sure that he had met Dagger Don before, yet when, where and under what circumstances he could not for the life of him recall.

It came to him that he had heard of a dashing, daring fellow on the frontier, known as Dagger Don, and yet he could not remember any act of evil against the one so spoken of.

"May I ask, Dagger Don, if you found the chief, what you would do?"

"I would ask him from his wife just why he had deserted her, and tell him if he would leave Texas, go far away, she would be glad to join him again."

"If he refused?"

"She would then ignore his existence and continue her life at the ranch, senor."

"She is a very remarkable woman, Dagger Don, and I cannot understand her fascination for that man, her almost idolatrous love for him."

"You would if you knew the man as I do, senor," was Dagger Don's rejoinder.

CHAPTER XXIII.

NOT BRANDED.

"HE is then such a fine fellow after all, in spite of his desperate orgies and red banded life?" asked Monte Joe with a smile.

"The truth is, senor, he is a man of superior education, and possesses many accomplishments.

"As I understand it, for it is hard to discover anything of his past, he was a planter's son, and was educated in Europe, but left college to serve in the Italian Army from a love of adventure.

"He is a superb swordsman, speaks French, Italian, German and Spanish as he does his mother tongue, while he has a voice that would bring him a fortune before the footlights as a singer.

"In spite of his giant size he is a man of perfect physique, and he is utterly devoid of fear.

"A brilliant talker, he is witty, sarcastic and can fairly fascinate even a man if he so tries to do, while women adore him.

"Then too he paints, sketches and writes pretty verses, while altogether he is just the man to win a woman's love and hold it."

"And his bad qualities?"

"Well, they are as pronounced as his good ones and virtues.

"He is a demon when under the influence of drink, and is as merciless as the animal whose name he bears.

"He would kill for the sheer love of doing so, it would seem, and would face any odds if he had a point to gain."

"And is as hard to kill as a cat?" laughed Monte Joe.

"Harder, senor, for Tiger Tom has more than nine lives."

"He was also in the United States Army, Dagger Don, and then known as Thomas Tresscott of the —th Cavalry."

"Senor Monte Joe, I have an idea that he is not that man."

"It cannot be that he is other than Tresscott."

"Why so, senor."

"Could there be two just such men?"

"It does appear as though it would be a miracle if there were two, senor."

"He is the same size, height, form; has the same bearing as Tresscott, hair, eyes and massive shoulders."

"In truth his face is the same, yes and his actions too, for Tresscott was a fiend incarnate when around, and a most lovable fellow at other times, just as you describe your chief."

"My chief, senor?"

"Well, Tiger Tom."

"The man Tresscott, too, was a fine musician, and his voice was the admiration of all at the fort, it was said, while he sketched and caricatured every one about the barracks until he got himself constantly into trouble.

"He at last got upon a spree, and it ended in his killing the paymaster, robbing him of a large sum and deserting.

"Your Tiger Tom, Dagger Don, is Tom Tresscott, and none other."

"It would seem so, senor, and yet I cannot be wholly convinced that it is so."

"Another good proof is that he wears in his hand, done in India ink, 'T. T., 5th Cav., U. S. Army,' which Tresscott had in his right hand."

"That would be further convincing proof, senor."

"Yes; but tell me, what caused his wife to allow him to organize a lawless band for raids upon Texan rancheros and settlements?"

"Senor, I do not believe such a band was organized, and it is yet to be proven that it was Tiger Tom and his men who ever made a raid upon the settlements."

"You do not deny that he had a League?"

"He had, senor, and banded together for protection, he claimed, against Indians and Mexican raiders, and nothing else."

"Did you not belong to it?"

"No, senor, for see, I do not wear the brand."

Dagger Don held out his left hand as he spoke, the palm upturned to view, and Monte Joe saw no brand there of the Star and Tiger.

He had tried hard to find if Dagger Don did wear it, and for that reason had played cards with him.

But he had been foiled thoroughly, until the man showed his hand himself, and revealed no mark visible therein.

This set Monte Joe to thinking.

He had not supposed that Tiger Tom had a single follower who did not wear his brand, and yet here was Dagger Don, the manager now of the old Mission Ranch, who was certainly free from it.

What could it mean, other than that the man before him was not as he supposed, one of the League, and also was not in the secret of the chief.

He had come to Trail Crossing upon a mission, he had said, for the Cattle Queen, and this also implied that she too was free from being the ally of her evil husband.

It was true, as Dagger Don asserted, there was no actual proof against the members of the Star and Tiger League, that they were raiders upon Texas soil, but no one doubted the chief being thoroughly lawless, and with men thus allied to him, and not in his employ as cowboys on the ranch, it was natural to suppose that they were banded together for evil purposes alone, especially as they were known to be a desperate lot of fellows.

At last Monte Joe said:

"Well, Dagger Don, I have misjudged you, I admit; but we must be friends now, and if I can serve you, command me, for you saved my life to-night."

"Should I learn aught of Tiger Tom, I will send a courier at once to you with all the information I can get."

"I thank you, senor, and I owe you my life also, and I am your friend, believe me."

"To-morrow I go again on my hunt for Tiger Tom, for I have promised the Cattle Queen to do all I can to find him for her," and the two parted for the night and the next morning Dagger Don continued on his way.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE DAY FOLLOWING.

WHEN the people of Trail Crossing got about the next morning the stranger had departed, and inquiry of Sambo at the stables brought the information that he had gone just at dawn, and had taken the trail toward the Rio Grande settlements.

The curtains over the windows in Monte Joe's rooms were seen to be drawn close, to shut out all light, so it was known that he was still taking his morning nap, as was his wont, for the gambler seldom retired before the eve of dawn, and sleeping until noon, combined his breakfast and dinner into one meal.

There was some show of excitement in the town, after the happenings of the night, for there had been three deaths, and, consequently, the funerals of as many men were to take place that afternoon.

A funeral was a sensation in Trail Crossing, for, in spite of the regularity with which they occurred, and the frequency, they were enjoyed,

if I may be allowed to use the word, to the fullest extent.

"If a man "died with his boots on," the occasion of his burial held that much greater charm, than if he had been such an old fogey fellow as to take time to die in bed from natural causes. But it was a rarity for even Trail Crossing to enjoy three funerals the same day.

One, two maybe often occurred, but a trio was an event!

It was true there had been occasions when Trail Crossing had been called upon to bury as high as half a dozen men, all of whom had died with their boots on, and on the same night, for these deeds of darkness were almost invariably done under cover of the night.

And it may be said here that as surely as the graveyard was the end of the journey, the starting-point had been from Cocktail Tom's Lone Star Saloon.

But these days, when half a dozen men had been laid to rest, were regarded pretty much as George Washington's birthday, the Fourth of July and kindred holidays are looked upon elsewhere.

So with three men to bury, the Trail Crossing denizens were in a state of subdued anticipation and excitement.

The news had gone around about the stranger's coming, his game of cards with Gentle Jack, and how Monte Joe had "chipped in," with results already known to the reader.

The sudden end of Gentle Jack, at the hand of Monte Joe, who was so calmly sleeping away the morning hours, his rooms darkened even at the chance of having grim specters appear about his bed, had furnished "Deader Number One" for the funeral entertainment.

The death of the man who had climbed the tree to kill Monte Joe on his way home, made "Number Two," and had the stranger been there in the morning he would have received a vote of thanks for his furnishing the remains for burial.

"Number Three" was the last man of the trio who had played in the game with the stranger, now known to be Dagger Don.

The stranger had told how the two had tossed up to see who would do the killing, and that while the one who got the lot to shoot Monte Joe climbed a tree, the other waited for his coming at the river.

He had already in the boat the body of his friend Gentle Jack, and impatiently awaited to hear the shot that would turn up the toes of the gambler, and then be ready for the coming of the assassin.

The stern of the boat was backed up against the bank, the oars were in place, his hands resting upon them, and the body of Gentle Jack lay in the bottom of the boat, a ghastly spectacle for his friend to constantly gaze upon.

The longer he looked at it the more nervous he became, and he was almost tempted to row away and take the body to the cabin, when there came one, two shots, fired in quick succession back on the hill at Trail Crossing.

Then he listened for running feet, but none were heard approaching.

The minutes passed by and no friend came, so the man with his hands upon the oars said sharply:

"The fool did not kill Monte Joe, and got killed for his bad aim.

"He should have known that it would be sudden death to him unless he put a bullet in the gambler's brain.

"But I must look out for my own safety."

At this he sent the boat flying down the river for the distance of a quarter of a mile, and then landed in a clump of timber upon the other shore.

Shouldering the body of Gentle Jack he bore it to a cabin back some hundred yards from the river, and then remembered that his partner had the key of the padlock in his pocket.

He tried to get in through a window, but could not open the shutter, and at last got one of the oars, and, with it as a pry, drew out one of the staples.

Then he placed the body upon the floor, and going outside stood on the river-bank watching and waiting to see if his comrade was coming, and would hail him from the shore.

The howling of a wolf near the cabin caused him to retreat quickly to that shelter, to close the door and build a fire, after he had lighted a candle.

He had just got the fire to burning when he heard voices and steps outside, and the next moment the door was opened and a score of men stood before him.

CHAPTER XXV.

MONTE JOE PAYS THE BILL.

THE man turned deadly pale when he saw the crowd of visitors, who now entered his cabin.

He seemed intuitively to know that he was wanted.

"Well, pard, have you come over to help me in caring for poor Jack, whom Monte Joe murdered?" he asked, in a voice meant to be sympathetic.

"No, Pard Swett, we have come for a leetle talk with you," said the man who acted as leader, and he had a rope in his hand, a sight which but added to the fear of the man they visited.

"Well, Pard Hays, what is it?"

"Whar be your pard, Holcomb?"

"Oh, he went back up to the store to get a suit of clothes to lay out poor Jack in."

"Then he come here with you, fu'st?"

"Yes, he helped me bring the body here."

"And then went up to ther store?"

"Yes."

"He didn't have time to do all this, Swett."

"Well, he did."

"How did he go?"

"Walked, of course."

"Across the river?"

"I suppose he took the boat."

"Your boat is at ther landing, and one oar is here."

"How did yer git inter Holcomb's cabin?"

"He let me in."

Some one in the rear then said that the staples were pulled out, and the leader continued:

"Here is the key, for I got it from Holcomb's pocket!"

"I guesses you is lying, Swett."

"What about?"

"Holcomb did not come here with you, but helped you to the boat with the body."

"Then you determined ter lay fer Monte Joe, and draw'd lots ter see who should kill him."

"He had ter do ther dirty work, so you waited with ther boat until yer heerd ther shots, and as he didn't come a-runnin', yer lit out fer here, bu'sted off ther lock and jist built a fire, fer we seen yer from ther river."

"Did Holcomb tell you this?" asked the man, anxiously.

"No, for he's beyond talking."

"Dead?" cried Swett, in a tone of horror.

"Yes."

"You strung him up?"

"No, only the stranger got onto yer leetle game and shot him afore he kilt Monte Joe."

"It's a lie! I have not seen the stranger."

"No, but he seen you, all ther same, and so we has come fer you, Pard Swett."

"Come for me?"

"Yes."

"What do you want with me?"

"To hang yer."

"To hang me?"

"Yes."

"Would you murder me?"

"Oh, no, we acts accordin' ter law, and sich as you is does ther murderin'."

"I've killed no one."

"Maybe not, and maybe so."

"But you plotted to kill Monte Joe, and though he are pretty well able ter take care of himself, we intends to stop this murdering work in Trail Crossing."

"You, Holcomb and Gentle Jack put up a game ter cheat that stranger, and he was too sharp fer yer, and then you wanted to kill Monte Joe because he chipped in to have things go squar'."

"Yer failed, and Gentle Jack lies thar, his chips called in by Monte Joe, Holcomb is dead up in ther timber, and you will soon be jist as badly deceased as they be, fer we is goin' ter hang yer."

"Hain't we, pards?"

This appeal to the crowd met with a decided answer in the affirmative.

"Does any one say no ag'in' it?"

"I say you shall not murder me," cried the unfortunate man.

"The ayes has it, so you has got ter hang, Pard Swett."

"Have you no mercy, men?"

"Justice has got ter be blind-eyed ter Marcy, pard, and do her duty."

"Stand back, all of you," and the man suddenly dropped his hands upon his revolvers.

But one present who was watching him closely the while, anticipated his intention and threw his lasso coil quickly over him, pinning his arms to his side, and in an instant he was secured.

Then the prisoner, and the body of the dead Gentle Jack, were taken to the boats of the visitors and half an hour after the crowd had reached the timber near the Lone Star Saloon, where Holcomb had met his doom.

His body lay there upon a board, and beneath the tree where he had hidden, the doomed man was placed, his arms bound firmly and a lariat about his neck.

The other end of the lariat was thrown over a limb, and after giving him just five minutes respite, the struggling wretch was dragged into mid-air.

Thus it was that Trail Crossing was supplied with three bodies for burial, on the day following the tragic scene in the Lone Star Saloon which the coming of Dagger Don had caused.

The form of the hanged man was left suspended for the citizens to see and take warning, and there lay the forms of Gentle Jack and Holcomb also.

There was one thing about the citizens of Trail Crossing greatly in their favor, and that was that they held no enmity toward the dead, no matter what they had been in life.

So after the sun rose Swett's body was cut down, and the three dead comrades were decently prepared for burial.

As Monte Joe was to pay the bills, no expense

was spared, and had the dead been heroes, and could have witnessed their funeral they would have been proud of their town and the turn-out made.

Monte Joe arose at noon, had his breakfast-dinner, and then promptly paid the self-constituted undertakers, and Trail Crossing subsided until another tragedy should occur.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE MESSENGER'S REPORT.

BACK to old Mission Ranch we wend our way, kind readers.

Upon the piazza of her house sits the Cattle Queen, her face slightly paler than usual, for she has mourned more over the desertion of her husband, his strange treatment of her, than she did over his death.

She had his memory then, ever true, good and loving to her, and his grave, as she believed, with her always; but now feeling that he had deserted her, was alive when she believed him dead, it was a bitter, a cruel blow for her to bear.

The sun was nearing the horizon, and far off over the prairie she saw the cowboys grazing and the cattle and horses in toward the corral for the night.

There was water there, some grass, and it was safer than to leave them out upon the prairie.

She had sent Dagger Don on a mission.

He was to visit the camps, the settlements, and certain ranches, not expecting to find Tiger Tom himself, but to discover some one who could tell him all about the mysterious chief and why he avoided his house.

For reasons best known to himself, Dagger Don had gone in disguise, or rather he had cut off his long hair, his beard, and dressed in different attire than was his wont.

When the Cattle Queen knew the result of his mission, when the time she had set for Tiger Tom's return to her, or communication with her, had passed, she had determined to act.

She had made up her mind as to what course she would pursue, and she was the very one to stick to her determination.

Suddenly as her eyes swept the prairie in a different direction from the one where the cattle and horses were coming in for the night, she started, for she saw a moving object afar off.

Instantly she got up and took her field-glass from the bracket where it was kept, and turned it upon the object that had caught her eyes.

"It is a horseman, and he comes from toward the Rio Grande," she said quickly.

"He is too far off yet for me to see who, or what he is."

Half an hour passed and the cattle and horses had come in to the corral, in the rear of the hill, and one side of which was a natural ridge like a wall of rock, the other being a stockade fence. In case of an attack the cattle could be driven up the hill into a smaller and safe corral.

The cowboys had closed the stockade gates, one of their number remained on sentinel duty for the night, and the others, four in number, were riding up the steep trail toward the cabin.

The horseman seen afar off had approached so near that the Cattle Queen was able to recognize him.

"It is Dagger Don," she said to herself, and she watched his coming with a brighter face.

The sun was just sinking beneath the horizon when Dagger Don dismounted before the cabin door, turned his horse loose to go to the stable alone, where the man kept about the place was there to look after him, and ascending to the piazza was warmly greeted by the Cattle Queen.

"I am glad to see you back again, Dagger Don, for I was getting anxious about you, my friend," she said in her sweet way.

His horse had looked gaunt and worn out, and the man's face was haggard.

But he said cheerily:

"I had a long and hard trip of it, senora; but I am back again and have made the rounds, for I even went into Mexico."

"Sit there, Dagger Don, and tell me all about it," she said eagerly.

"Well, senora, let me tell you that but for Monte Joe I would not now be here, for he saved my life."

"He is one of the best and bravest fellows I ever met," Dagger Don said with enthusiasm.

"Then you went to Trail Crossing?"

"Oh, yes, senora, I struck the camps, looked in upon the Hassan Ranch and they treated me well, though I stopped but for dinner."

"Mrs. Hassan is a lovely woman, and her daughter Belle is beautiful, and as plucky a girl as I ever saw."

"The captain did not recognize you then?"

"Oh, no."

"He has keen eyes."

"Yes, senora, but he did not recognize me."

"Then I went on to Trail Crossing," and the man told of his adventures there, while he added:

"Those Trail Crossing people are queer ones, for as I rode out of the place in the early dawn, I saw the bodies of Gentle Jack and Holcomb laid out under the trees, and over them hung Swett, the third one of the party."

"I was rather glad not to stay longer in the place."

"And then?"

"I went to other camps, senora, and there struck the trail for the river."

"I could find not one who had seen, or heard of the chief, but you may be sure his coming to life again as they expect it, creates the greatest excitement."

"That he has gone into Mexico to stay I almost feel convinced, senora."

"You do not know my husband, Dagger Don—he will return for revenge alone," was the low response, of the woman.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE RED BOOK.

THE manner in which the Cattle Queen spoke, convinced Dagger Don that she was certain of the return of Tiger Tom.

"You think then he will return to Texas, senora?"

"I am sure of it."

"To seek revenge for having been worsted in the fight in the canyon?"

"Yes, and he will seek to get booty too, for he loves gold."

"Tiger Tom may have deserted me, he has done so, in fact; but he has not given up Texas, nor his hopes yet of gold and revenge."

"He is not the man to allow Buck Taylor to live, for he is unforgiving and merciless in his hatred."

"But he has no men now."

"He can get them in Mexico, as you know."

"That reminds me, senora, in playing cards with Gentle Jack I noticed that he had the brand of the Star and Tiger upon his palm."

"Ah! was that so?"

"It was, and had he not accused me of cheating I would have made myself known to him, though I had not time, and I was not sure as to his comrades."

"You did not see their hands?"

"I could not get a glimpse at their left palm, though I thought I caught sight of the blue star on the hand of one of them, but was not sure."

"The man's name was Gentle Jack you say?"

"Yes, senora, the man whom Monte Joe killed."

"Then I will know in a minute."

"Come in."

She led the way into the sitting-room, where the negress had lighted a lamp, as it was dark now, and then telling Dagger Don to await her return she went to her own chamber.

Soon she returned with a large red book in her hand.

"Dagger Don, you said his name was Gentle Jack?"

"Yes, senora."

She opened the book and ran her finger slowly down the page where something was written.

"Gentle Jack, Number Twenty-seven—yes, and his name follows here, but that is not a secret to be revealed, as you know."

"He was one of the League of the Star and Tiger, Dagger Don."

"I was sure of that, senora."

"And the names of the others?"

"I only know that one was called Pat Holcomb, the other—"

"One moment, please."

Again she glanced at the page, turned it over and said:

"Pat Holcomb, Number Thirty-two, and his real name follows."

"Then I was right, for it was in Holcomb's band I thought I saw the brand."

"And the other?"

"His comrades called him Barney Swett."

"Ah!" and again a search was made of the page.

"Yes, he, too, was one of the League, for here it is:

"Barney Swett, Number Forty-one, and his name follows, age, place of birth, and cause of leaving home, as with all others of the League, as you know, for they give their records to record here truthfully in this *Red Book of Retribution* as it is called."

"The band has certainly met terrible losses of late, senora."

"Yes, it certainly has; but are you sure that the keen eyes of Monte Joe did not see the brand in your hand Dagger Don?"

"Do you see it, senora?" was the question, and the man held his left palm up to view.

The woman started, glanced at his face after a quick look at the palm, and then said:

"What do you mean to say that you are not—" and she grasped the Red Book of Retribution.

"No, senora, you need not look in the Doom Book, for I am one of the League, only I was careful not to give it away to any curious eyes, and so hid it with a paint I have."

"By renewing the paint every day or two it keeps the brand hidden, and yet I can work it off and reveal it in an instant."

"I deceived Monte Joe in this, for it was better that he should not know, I thought."

"But then again, senora, my brand is, for reasons you will find in the Doom Book, upon my right palm, not the left; but you know, I be-

lieve, that while a member of the League is alive, no one but the chief has a right to look up his record, so you will not turn to mine."

"No, I shall break no order of the League, Dagger Don."

"But I thank you for your services for me, and now I wish to tell you that I need you more than ever."

"Yes, senora."

"You are still ready to serve me?"

"With my life, senora."

"But the chief?"

"The chief has deserted me, senora, and the League, for here is the headquarters of the band."

"He has been worsted, put to flight, and is a fugitive in a foreign land."

"I know the laws of the League perfectly, and they read that in the absence, or death of the chief, all are to look to the Lady Captain for orders, and to obey her as they would him."

"Yes, and now I shall put you to the test, Dagger Don, for I have a secret to reveal to you to-morrow, after you have rested, for you need rest and food now, I can plainly see."

"You have but to command, senora, and I obey," was the response of Dagger Don.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE CATTLE QUEEN'S SECRET.

THE Cattle Queen was by no means a poor woman, as far as this world's goods went.

She had her ranch, and as many thousands of acres surrounding as the cattle chose to roam upon.

There were half a hundred or more, head of cattle, with a couple of hundred horses, from fine animals of Kentucky breeds, to Indian ponies.

There were also half a hundred sheep, a drove of hogs and plenty of chickens, while game could be found on all sides so that the table was always well supplied.

A "prairie schooner" as the wagons were called, sent to the settlement once every two months, brought back all needed supplies, and the sale of a few cattle now and then paid the cowboys off and left a bonus.

With the increase in her herds she would have become rich in time, and yet her nature was becoming restless, since the conduct of her husband and she was getting revengeful and almost vicious.

With her husband, had he been content to have lived a quiet life there, she would have been perfectly happy, asking no more; but he had not been of a nature to live without evil, and so had gone from bad to worse until the brand of outlaw was upon him.

She could not forgive his treatment of her.

It had made her vindictive toward the world, it seemed, and she had planned to carry out a determination she had formed.

This was her secret, as she called it, and the next day after the return of Dagger Don she called to him to come upon the piazza as she wished to have a talk with him.

Dagger Don looked refreshed after his night's rest, and said:

"I am ready now, senora, to receive your commands, be they what they may."

"I will tell you first that I am sure that my husband has a motive in his treatment of me."

"Yes, but what can it be?"

"Do you know of friends that he has in Mexico?"

"I cannot say that I do, senora."

"Well, I feel assured that he has fallen in love with some Mexican woman, and thus believing I shall act as I deem best."

"I need not hide from you, Dagger Don, that I am aware that my husband's life was a lawless one."

"I may also confess that I was getting together ill-gotten gold, gold that cost tears and blood, and yet I allowed it to be so, hoping for a happy ending of it all before very long."

"That hope has vanished, and now I shall become the Tigress of Texas and men shall fear me far and wide."

"But, senora, I—"

"Hear me, Dagger Don, and then if you fear to follow my lead say so frankly."

"I will go blindly wherever you lead, senora."

"Nobly said, my good friend."

"But you will urge that where the Tiger of Texas had a band of half a hundred men, the Tigress of Texas has no one to aid her other than half a dozen cowboys attached to her ranch."

"This much is true, senora."

"Yes, and yet, you are to be my lieutenant, my aide, and upon you, Dagger Don, I depend to get me a band of men such as I need."

"But where, senora?"

"In the camps, at the ranches, in the settlements, as the men of Tiger Tom were secured."

"Yes, senora."

"You are a good judge of men, and upon you devolves the duty of securing, say twenty, bold, wicked fellows, who will hesitate at nothing I may command them to do."

"We need supplies, so I shall go to the settlement to purchase them, and I will secure there an equal number, for I, too, read human nature correctly, and I will make no mistake, mark me well."

"When the men have reported here, I will sift the chaff from the wheat, and the men I need I will retain."

"Then, let the ranchmen guard well their homes and their cattle, for the Tigress of Texas will take the trail for booty, and scalps must fall, too, if need be."

"If Buck Taylor and his Knights of the Rope can capture me, can detect me in any lawless act, they are welcome to do so; yes, to hang me as they would a Mexican."

"And more, Dagger Don, I have other game to bag."

"Other game, senora?"

"Yes."

"May I ask what it is?"

"It is to capture the Tiger himself."

"Your husband?"

"Yes, why not, for is he not my foe, now that he has ceased to be my friend?"

There was no answering this argument, and so Dagger Don remained silent.

"Now, Dagger Don, you start toward the river settlements, and I will go toward the upper ranches and Trail Crossing."

"You leave to-morrow, and I will depart the day after."

"Tell your men to come here, by a certain time, and lead them to feel that it is death if they fail you, and gold in plenty if they join the League."

"I understand, perfectly, senora, and shall obey your bidding."

"Do so, my gallant aide, and you will have no cause to regret having served me well."

"Now you know my secret, and once the band is formed, riches will be the result."

And the face of the woman wore a determined look that showed she had the genius and the will to carry out her bold plans.

CHAPTER XXIX.

ON THE HOME TRAIL.

TIGER TOM departed from Pablo's hacienda in Mexico, with a full knowledge of the dangers he was to encounter in re-entering Texas.

Not like other men in size, he could assume no disguise that would enable him to pass unknown through a crowd.

His stature would surely reveal his identity.

Still he had determined to look over the situation for himself, and he was not the man to be deterred from it by any danger he would have to encounter.

The four men who had escaped with him, in his break through the lines at the Canyon of Caverns, were now able to return also to duty, the wounded ones having recovered, and so the party of five left the hacienda and wended their way together to the river.

They camped on the bank until nightfall, and then Tiger Tom gave each one his orders separately and bade them go singly upon their way, each with instructions that in no way conflicted with the other.

At a given time they were to meet him at a rendezvous appointed in the range some fifteen miles from the old Mission Ranch.

One of the men was to make the tour of the cowboy camps and learn if any men of the League of the Star and Tiger had escaped and were among them.

Another was to visit the settlements and see whom he could pick up there who were members of the League.

A third was to go among the ranches, and the fourth was to disguise himself as much as possible and go to both Fort S— and Round-top Post, visiting the last named just before meeting the chief at the rendezvous.

The shrewdest one of the lot was to go on this important work, and he was blessed with a face that could readily be mistaken for that of an Israelite, so much so in fact that he was known as "Jew Jim."

"Take this gold, Jew Jim, and go to town first, buying you a saddle-pack and a led horse.

"Get you a lot of goods and strike out as a Jew peddler, for you sing Dutch songs well and certainly have a fine accent when you wish to imitate a Jew, for I have often heard you."

"Blay t'e Jew mans in earnest, you vas means, captain?" asked Jew Jim at once assuming the accent.

"That is it and you can do it to perfection."

"There are three hundred dollars in that buckskin bag, and you can get a good horse and outfit with it, and you'll be welcomed at the forts with your goods, so you can find out all that is necessary about our men."

"I do not believe there are any prisoners at Fort S— but there are plenty at Round-top Post, and you may be able to rescue them under the very eyes of Buck Taylor."

"I vill vant more monish, captain, for fear of accidents."

"Ahl you have begun to play the Jew at once, in demanding money, have you?" laughed the chief.

"I may have to bribe some beobles, mine friend."

"Very true, and I will give you a hundred more, for you will have more from the sale of your wares."

"Very true, sir, I had not thought of that,

and I'll get Jew prices too," said Jew Jim with a laugh, dropping his accent.

Having arranged with his men, and seen them start upon their separate ways, the chief mounted and rode down to the ford.

He was splendidly mounted upon a very large, clean-limbed animal, and in addition to a pair of revolvers in his belt had one in his holster and a rifle hung at his back.

Back of the cantle of his saddle was a roll of *serapes* in a rubber blanket, and a haversack of provisions swung at one side, so that he was well prepared for a fight, or a camping out for days.

Such a man as he appeared to be could make a desperate defense, or would press a foe hard, with odds in his favor even against numbers.

During the night the chief rode on his way, and seeming to know the country perfectly, held on through the range several hours' ride from old Mission Ranch.

Just at dawn he sought a camping-place, and he was most particular to cover up his trail to it most carefully, and then to take observations all around him, to guard against surprise.

At last he seemed satisfied with his surroundings showing no evidences of a foe in lurking near, and having staked his horse out where there was an abundance of grass, he spread his blankets among the rocks, ate a cold breakfast, as he dared not light a fire, and then lay down to rest.

The training of ten years over his nerves enabled him to sink at once into a profound slumber, and he did not awaken until late in the afternoon.

He was greatly refreshed, took a plunge in the stream running near, ate his dinner, and just as the sun reached the horizon mounted his well-rested horse and set out at a canter across the prairie for the old Mission Ranch, muttering to himself:

"A short while longer will tell the story."

"It is a bold game, but I will play it to the end."

CHAPTER XXX.

THE FUGITIVE CHIEF.

The shadows of night fell before the fugitive chief drew within several miles of the old Mission Ranch.

He, however, held on steadily, keeping his horse at a canter as though he knew he would find rest at the end of his journey.

He kept his eyes constantly on the alert for a lurking foe, as he felt that he was treading upon dangerous ground.

At last a glimmer of light appeared ahead.

"It is the ranch," he muttered, as his eyes caught sight of it.

"She will not have retired, and I will put her to the test at once."

"If I fail, then she will be my foe, as so many others are; but, if I do not fail, then I will get riches, and in the end throw myself upon her clemency."

"But, no; I must not, will not fail, I feel assured."

And on he rode, the hill looming up dark before him, excepting for the one glimmer of light upon the top, where stood the cabin.

It looked like a beacon to him, and so he took it, rising out of the prairie he could see all about him.

He reached the foot of the hill, and let his horse slowly ascend the steep trail to the stockade gate.

Here he halted an instant, as though undecided what to do, but at length opened the gate and rode in.

As he did so, there came bounding down toward him, in the darkness, half a dozen huge and savage dogs.

But he uttered a low command and they ceased their savage outcry, and came around him with whines of pleasure.

Dismounting, he yet did so reluctantly, and leaving his well-trained animal standing to await him, he walked on toward the piazza.

He saw in the darkness some one sitting there, and by the light from the sitting-room door he discovered that it was a woman.

She did not move as he advanced, and he halted at the steps within ten feet of her.

She was not asleep; she must see him, and yet she neither spoke nor moved.

At last he uttered the one word—her name:

"Valerie!"

"Who are you, sir, that dares call me by that name?" came in a distinct, cutting tone.

"Valerie, it is I, your husband."

"Have you no welcome for me?"

"I have no welcome for you, Thomas Tracey, for I no longer acknowledge you as my high lord and master," was the response, in a tone full of sarcasm.

"And what have I done to be thus received, Valerie?"

"What have you done?"

"Do you ask that question of me?"

"I do."

"I will relieve your most treacherous memory, then, sir."

"Pray do so," and his tone was sarcastic now.

It seemed to sting her, and she answered quickly:

"I gave you my heart when first I saw you, Thomas Tracey, and my hand when you asked it."

"You saved me from death upon the running stream that awful night, but now I wish that I had perished, for since then my life has been a wreck."

"I followed you through all, with love as our idol, my love for you, gold as another one, and I even clung to you when you sinned to get riches."

"I came here with you, to this desolate spot, and I would have been happy even here had you but been true and good."

"But you disowned me, for you let me mourn for you as dead, suffer as only a woman such as I alone can suffer, and sorrow for you dead."

"I visited your grave day and night to weep there, and so sure was I that you would not deceive me, that when I saw you, I believed against all reason, that you had come from the spirit land."

"You gave me twice a shock I can never forget or forgive, when you came here by night pretending to appear in the spirit and not as flesh and blood."

"Then came the news to me that your ghost was roaming the prairies, and next that you had been caught in a trap in the Canyon of Caverns and nearly annihilated with your hand."

"You escaped with several others, and fled to Mexico, and you were there in that canyon plotting a raid upon the settlements."

"You were within easy ride of me and came not near me, sent me no word."

"I next heard of you from your supposed slayer, Buck Taylor, who came here and told me how you were deceiving me."

"In my presence they opened the grave by which I had knelt, over which I had prayed, wept and mourned, and it was found to be empty."

"You had planned a bold game to be buried alive and then rescued by some one you took into your confidence, perhaps some foe you paid well for the work of resurrection of your body."

"It was a desperate chance you took, but it was successful, Thomas Tracey."

"Then you went your way to find fairer face and form than mine—"

"That were impossible, Valarie," said the man, earnestly.

"Well, you left me, deserted me, and now that your band has been wiped out, and you are in distress and a fugitive, you come back here to me."

"But you come too late, and I bid you go."

"This is not your home, but mine, and you shall never darken its door again."

"You have been the Tiger of Texas, but now I am the Tigress of Texas!"

"Go, Tiger Tom, or I will kill you," and the Tigress of Texas suddenly rose and covered the giant with a revolver she had quickly drawn from her belt.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE GRAVES IN THE CANYON.

THE man was no coward, as has been said.

His giant physique, his marvelous, his phenomenal strength, all cried out against his being afraid, and especially of a woman.

And that woman whose love he had won, whom he had sworn to love and honor, to cherish through life.

But what excuse could he offer her for his desertion of her, for desertion it had been.

He had deceived her, had caused her to mourn him dead while he yet lived.

He had left to others the duty of taking him from the grave, of nursing him back to life, and then he had gone his way wholly free of her.

So it was that she argued, and felt that he must do the same.

Now he came back to her, and why?

He was a defeated man, homeless, a murderer and a fugitive, and he came to seek her aid.

But her heart was steeled against him now, and she would not excuse him, she would not take him back to her heart and her life again.

So it was that she had covered him with her revolver, and bid him go, or she would kill him.

In vain he urged, in vain he argued, for she was determined, and would not yield.

She kept him covered with her revolver, and had he been inclined to add another crime to his long list of guilty deeds and kill her, he could never have done so.

Her skill was known, she was a dead shot and she had an iron nerve.

There was no tremor in the hand that held the revolver.

"So you drive me from you?" he said, half-reproachfully.

"I do drive you from me."

"You have no love for me?"

"So little now that I will kill you as I would any other desperado who attempts to invade my house."

"Go!"

"I will go now, yes, but I will return some day."

"If you do I will feel that you come as my foe, and I shall meet you accordingly."

"And more, and for the last time I bid you, I command you to go your way, Tiger Tom."

He saw that she was in deadly earnest, that she had made up her mind to kill him, and so he turned away with the remark:

"I will go, yes, but to come again."

"I have warned you, so you must take the consequences."

He turned away now, walked slowly toward his horse, and mounting rode away in the gloom.

He was completely upset and hardly knew which way to turn.

He had appointed a rendezvous with his men some time hence, but he had expected meanwhile to lie in hiding at his own home.

Now what was he to do?

There was but one thing he could do, and that was to go to the rendezvous and wait.

He had provisions with him, game he could kill to help him out, and by lying in wait on the trails at night, or scouting around his place of concealment he could perhaps find some wayfarer whom he could kill, or rob.

He would have the days for sleep and the nights for prowling.

The rendezvous was the Canyon of Caverns.

Few dared go there before the battle of the Cowboy Clans, and now, with many other graves there, no one would seek the spot.

But he had no fear of the dead, and he would feel perfectly safe there.

So thither he rode through the gloom.

He entered the canyon under cover of the darkness, and then halted until dawn.

Some one might be there, and he wished daylight to discover if there was or not.

He did not go into camp, but sat down by his horse and waited the coming of dawn.

"Perhaps the cowboys did not remove their wounded, but remained here with them until they recovered," he said to himself, and thus he was too cautious to ride into a trap.

But the day at last dawned, and he carefully reconnoitered the canyon.

In one part of it he saw a number of newly-made graves.

Some were apart from the others, and one lot were treble the number of the others.

"Those are the Tigers," he said, pointing to the larger number, who were, however, buried as decently as were the cowboys who had fallen.

The Clan had no enmity to the dead.

At the head of the cowboys' graves was a tree, and into the bark had been very skillfully cut with a knife the following:

"In Memory
of
OUR DEAD HERO PARDS
of
BUCK TAYLOR'S COWBOY CLAN."

The graves of the dead who had fallen under Tiger Tom's lead had also a line to mark their resting-place cut into a tree.

It read:

"THE TIGERS OF TEXAS LIE HERE."

This told the story of the battle between the Cowboy Clan and the Tigers.

"Well, there is one Tiger here who is not yet buried, as those cowboys of Buck Taylor shall learn," said the giant, grimly, as he hurried away and sought a good camping-place in the canyon.

CHAPTER XXXII.

TRUE TO THEIR PLEDGE.

BUCK TAYLOR was anxious to see what could be done with the prisoners whom he had taken, ere they were, as they must be, unless something could be proven against them, set free by Colonel Forsythe.

Of course they were not allowed to suspect this, and in fact it was arranged that their guards should be overheard by them discussing the probabilities that they would be hanged.

This was done to cause any one of them to turn traitor, or rather state's evidence and thus save his life.

Could this be accomplished, and both Colonel Forsythe and Buck Taylor hoped that it could be, the work of the Cowboy Clan would not have to be done over.

That is if one of the men confessed that they were a pack of thieves, and raiders, then the prisoners could be held and tried.

If not, they must go free, with the result that they would again go on lawless trails and have to be hunted down once more.

If set free, of course Tiger Tom would band them together again.

Of course, knowing that they were guilty, the prisoners did not once suspect that the question had arisen that there was no proof to hold them on, and this both the colonel and the cowboy captain were anxious they should not know.

In looking about to begin his work of investigation Buck Taylor learned that there was one man in the hospital who could not live.

This was the man he wanted. So he went to the hospital and sought out Doctor Schufeldt the surgeon. The doctor met him with the remark:

"Well, Taylor, one of your prisoners is going to make his escape soon."

"You mean he will die?"

"Yes, he cannot live but a few days at furthest."

"That is the man I have come to see."

"Well, he is conscious, perfectly so, and I will take you to him."

"Does he know that he must die?"

"Yes."

"You have told him so, doctor?"

"I deemed it my duty to do so, yesterday."

"Then he is a Catholic, and I sent for a priest for him."

The two now entered the ward where the wounded prisoners were.

"Doctor, could you remove that man's cot away from his comrades?"

"Certainly, and to pleasanter quarters," was the answer of the humane surgeon.

The steward was called and four soldiers came and carried the cot to an unoccupied room.

Here Buck Taylor and Doctor Schufeldt soon went.

The wounded prisoner was a dark-faced man, evidently a Mexican, though he spoke English without the slightest accent.

"Well, my man, the doctor here tells me you are in a bad way, so I came to have a talk with you," said Buck Taylor kindly.

"I am dying," was the answer.

"Yes, I fear so."

"The doctor has sent for a priest for me."

"So he told me, and he will arrive to-day; but let me ask if you have not something you wish to confess to me?"

"Nothing."

"Remember that your confession of the crimes of the band to which you belong, will do a great deal of good in putting down lawlessness upon the border."

"You can relieve your soul of the guilt of what you have done, by doing a good act ere you die."

"I have nothing to tell."

"Suppose your priest urges you to do so?"

"I will not do it."

"You would confess it to him, however?"

"I shall confess to him my own wicked deeds, only; with the acts of others I have nothing to do."

"I will express my sorrow and repentance of my own sins, and ask from him absolution, but I will confess not one word even to my father confessor that will betray others," was the firm response of the dying man.

"Even should your priest urge it!"

"No."

"Should he refuse you absolution?"

"I would die without it."

"Well, my man, I have nothing to do with you and your religion, but I do urge that you will make a clean breast of it, as far as the clan of the Tigers of Texas is concerned."

"Will you?"

"No."

"If it is not known that you did so?"

"Still I say no."

"Is it fear that prevents?"

"How can it be fear when I shall be in my grave?"

"Then you would die without confessing?"

"Yes."

"Even without absolution?"

"Yes."

Buck Taylor could not but admire the pluck of the dying man, and the surgeon's admiration of it shone in his face.

But all argument was useless, and they had to leave the man with his secret untold, and to go to the grave with him, unless, as Buck Taylor said:

"Unless I can find some man who would rather confess than hang."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE PRIEST.

"THAT man has wonderful nerve," said Doctor Schufeldt, as he left the dying prisoner's quarters, accompanied by Buck Taylor.

"All of the band have, doctor, for not one of them, from fear or bribery, offers of liberty and dread of the gallows has been found to confess that the League of the Tigers is for aught else than a company formed to protect themselves against the Indians and the Mexican raiders."

"But you deem that they are really guilty?"

"I am sure of it, doctor, only I have not got the proof."

"Now that man knows he is dying, so has no fear of the gallows to cause him to confess, so I shall have to try the well ones."

"It will be best, and I would give them all separately a chance to backslide, for you know it is said that there is a black sheep in every flock."

"That is a good idea, doctor, and not to attract their attention to what I am doing would you help me out?"

"Willingly."

"I will go and see the colonel and put these men to the test before him, for they will understand that he has the authority to do as he wishes in the matter."

"And you wish me to hear what they have to say?"

"Well, I would like you, doctor, to go to the prison and say that each one has to be examined, and you will send for them as you wish them, for they are to change their quarters."

"As each man comes out, send him to headquarters, and then, when he comes back, to where they are to be put in the new barracks."

"This will prevent them from being able to communicate with their comrades what they are wanted for, and a hint that the soldiers also are to be examined, before going into the new barracks, that no disease can get in there, will lull any suspicion they may have."

"The very thing, Taylor, and just the way to plan it."

"I will go and see them now, and let them hear me issue orders to the soldiers also, and when you send me word I will order a prisoner out and dispatch him over to you."

"Let a sergeant do the duty, doctor, so you can come over with the first man and hear what he says, as I was going to ask the colonel to have you there; but there comes a courier and I guess it is the priest who is with him."

"Sure, and he rides as though he had much rather walk than come in a saddle."

"What a sorry picture a man who cannot ride is in the saddle, Taylor," and Surgeon Schufeldt laughed as he caught sight of the worthy priest, who sat upon his horse very much as a pair of tongs might.

The priest slipped off his horse with a hearty sigh of relief that the journey was at an end.

His pants had crept up nearly to his knees, his coat was all awry, and his hat had been crammed down over his head to keep it on, until but half his face was visible.

As he started to walk he did so like a man who was paralyzed, and when Dr. Schufeldt greeted him he looked woebegone.

He was an Irishman, and had come forty miles to see a dying man, but had it been twice as far he would not have hesitated in the discharge of his duties.

"Father Moriarty, I presume?" said the doctor.

"Yis, sur, by that same token I am what's left of Father Moriarty, for that baste has broken every bone in me blissid body, and bruised me flesh until it is the hue of a nagur's skin."

"I am Doctor Schufeldt, the surgeon of the Post, and it was I who sent for you to see a man who is dying."

"Let me present Buck Taylor, the Cowboy Chief, and who is also known as the Lasso Demon."

"Aba! but I've heard of that same gintlemin, and it's work he has given me before this, confessing min whom he has sint on the road to perdition."

"I'm glad to meet yez, gintlemin, and I'm guessin', docther, that I made the services of a man of medicine mesil, afther me pounding on the top of that baste, who never kapes but one foot on the ground at a time, bad luck to him."

"You are not accustomed to riding horseback, father?" suggested Buck Taylor.

"No, sur; it's the second toime I iver was on top of a horse, and I've yet to get absolved for breaking a vow I made whin I rode one the first toime, for thin I swore niver to be guilty of such a sin again."

"But whin a man sends for me to confess him, I'd go if I had to ride a camel, though I'd rather walk tin miles thin ride one. But, how is my man?"

"He is passing quietly away, father, and, as soon as you have rested and had some refreshments I will take you to him."

"My fri'nd, the way of duty l'ades first to that man's bidside, for the loives of us who are in good bith bang by a slender thread."

"Thin I will ate with yez, and drink with yez too."

"You are right, father," and Doctor Schufeldt led the way to the bedside of the dying outlaw.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

UNCONFESSED.

THE dying man's face lighted up brightly when the doctor entered and said:

"Raoul, here is the father to see you."

"God bless you, father, for coming so far to see a wretch like me," was the earnest response of the man.

Before entering the room Dr. Schufeldt and Buck Taylor had briefly stated the situation to the priest.

They had told him their belief that the Tigers of Texas were a band organized wholly for plunder, and led by the Desperado Ranchero Tracey. That they wished him to use his influence, if he saw proper to do so, to have the dying man confess to him, not under the secrecy of the confessional however, but for the public good, the secrets of the League and how the entire number could be entrapped.

The priest replied that whatever he could urge to be made public he would, but all else was sacred if told in a confession of sins to receive absolution.

So he sat down by the bedside of the man, when the doctor retired, and in a kindly way listened to the words told him.

He urged that the man should aid before he died in ridding the country of the outlaw band.

But after a long time passed with him, he came out and was met by the doctor, who made him his guest.

A bath awaited him, then a mint julep and afterward a most tempting dinner, at which Buck Taylor and a young captain of cavalry were invited guests.

The priest made known the result of his talk with the dying man.

The sins of his past he had confessed, and more he would not say, other than that he was a member of the League of the Tigers of Texas and that they had never, as a band, been guilty of one lawless act.

Their secret as a League, however, he could not and would not violate.

So all hope of obtaining a clew from that quarter was abandoned, and then the priest proved himself a most enjoyable companion.

He told a good story, laughed heartily at the wit of others, kept his glass empty with remarkable regularity, drank all toasts with a bumper and sung in a rich, mellow voice a number of Irish ballads, accompanying himself the while most skillfully upon the surgeon's guitar.

As the plan to have the dying man confess the secret of the League failed, the doctor allowed the priest to circulate around among the Catholics of the command, and invite their contributions to the good of the church, in return for his prayers for them, while he proceeded to carry out with Buck Taylor the plot to try and discover a traitor among the lot of able-bodied prisoners.

The colonel had consented to the plan, and so Doctor Schufeldt and Buck Taylor repaired to headquarters.

They were received by Colonel Forsythe who then gave the orders for the prisoners to be brought, one by one to his presence.

"You do the questioning, Taylor, and my adjutant will take down all that is said."

"You can refer to me when you wish, and, doctor, you are to be a witness."

Such was the arrangement, and soon the first prisoner was brought in.

He was a small, wiry fellow, with a weasel-like face that was wicked from chin to forehead.

He took in the situation at a glance, but looked toward Colonel Forsythe to address him.

"What is your name, sir?" asked Buck Taylor.

"Sawed Off Sam is what I answers to."

"What is your real name?"

"It has been so long since I was christened I has forgot it."

"It is doubtless entered upon the books of some prison?"

"Maybe."

"It would be if you had your deserts."

"I guess so."

"Where are you from?"

"Texas."

"Before you came to Texas where did you live?"

"Anywhar they'd let me."

"What is your business?"

"Everybody's business is my perfession, Pard Buck."

"That is your only occupation?"

"Waal, no, for I is a cow-puncher."

"You are a cowboy?"

"Yes, I be."

"Where do you work?"

"I has worked on different ranches."

"Well, Pard Sawed Off, you are a member of the League known as the Tigers of Texas, and if you wish to escape being hanged I have this to say to you."

"My ears is open fer hearin'," was the reply.

"It is just this, that unless you tell me all about the Secret League, how to catch Tiger Tom, and all else I would know, you will have to share the fate of your comrades, and it will be but a very short while before you discover what that fate is."

"If you do tell me the truth, then I am authorized by Colonel Forsythe, whom you see here, to give you five hundred dollars in cash, a horse and complete outfit and let you go free."

"If I does not, I'll hang?"

"You shall at once share the fate of your comrades."

"Pard Taylor, I guesses I'll have ter hang with the outfit," was the quiet response of the prisoner.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A STRONG TIE.

THE manner of the man, in thus accepting the alternative was perfectly resigned.

He was a surprise to all four present, for he had seemed to be such perfect material to work with.

After a glance at Colonel Forsythe Buck Taylor said:

"Suppose Sawed Off Sam, I should make that little sum of five hundred a thousand, what would you say?"

"Could yer go a leetle higher, pard?"

"Name what you will take?" asked Buck.

"Well, Pard Buck, would you say five thousand?"

Buck looked toward Colonel Forsythe, who said:

"Yes, but not a dollar more."

"Will you give me my freedom?"

"Yes."

"And a horse and outfit?"

"Yes."

"Won't send one of yer men on my trail ter knock me over the first camp I make?"

"It is to put down assassins I now wish to get your aid, not to do such a thing as you suggest," sternly said Buck Taylor.

"Wal, you wants ter know pretty bad, to do all you says, and I only wishes I c'u'd tell you somethin' and git ther dust; but ther fact be that I doesn't know nothin' more than that the band were got together ter protect ther ranches and settlements, and if they did any lawless deeds I don't know of it, pard."

Having failed by bribery to move the man to a confession, threats were next in order; but he was as placid as a May morn and said:

"See here, Pard Buck."

"Folks is awful scared o' dyin', but I hain't. It are one o' ther nateral happenin's o' life, death is, same as bein' born."

"People is born every minute in ther day, and they dies every minute."

"They comes inter ther world with ther knowledge that they has ter go out o' it by dyin'."

"Thar hain't no other way o' gettin' out o' life ef one wants ter, so why shu'd it scare a man silly?"

"It don't scare me wu'th a cent, and I intends ter enjoy livin' up ter my dyin' minute, and ef that be any fun in dyin' when I gits to it, I is goin' ter enjoy it, too."

"If it's bullet, steel, or rope, it's all ther same, ter be tuk like a dose o' bad medicine."

"The man is a philosopher, surely," said Colonel Forsythe, with a laugh, in which he was joined by the others.

Sawed Off Sam smiled in a pleasant way, and said:

"I hain't ter be bought off or bluffed, sir, ef that's what yer means."

"Well, Buck, you can let him go."

"Bein' as how I was too hard a nut ter crack easy," said the prisoner, with a wink at the colonel.

The sergeant was called in, and Mister Sawed Off Sam was taken to his new prison quarters.

Another prisoner was then brought in, and the result was the same, though the man turned deadly pale at the threats made by Buck Taylor.

Then came the third man, the fourth, and so on, until a bribe had been offered to each prisoner, and failing to gain a confession, threats had been bestowed, but with the same result.

"Not a soul of them will accept a bribe to betray the tie that binds them together, or be driven to do so by threats of hanging," said Colonel Forsythe.

"It is, indeed, a strong tie that holds them together," the adjutant remarked.

"There is one more, one of the wounded men, and he is about well, now," the doctor said.

He was sent for and came in with a limp, while he wore his right arm in a sling.

He was tall, bony, and with a strongly marked face.

But his eyes denoted cunning and avariciousness.

"What is your name?" asked Buck Taylor, sharply, becoming very tired of the catechism he had to go through.

"Yankee Zeke."

"You managed to get the two last letters in the alphabet for the initials of your name," said the cowboy chief.

"My parents gave me the name of Zekiel, and as I came from Maine my pards put Yankee before it."

"You have another name?"

"None that I claim."

"What name shall we put on your tombstone after we hang you?"

"Now I'm durned if I care, for I shall have lost my interest in life then," was the cool response.

"Well, Yankee Zeke, I wish to say to you, before Colonel Forsythe and his officers, that I can promise you a thousand dollars, a horse, outfit and your weapons, with your life and freedom, if you will give us the clew to run down the Tigress of Texas to a man, and capture their chief too."

"If I squeal, in fact, you mean?"

"I do."

"Repeat all you will give me."

Buck Taylor did so.

"You will not send after me to recapture me, when I have told you?"

"No, of course not."

"If I refuse?"

"You must share the fate of your comrades."

"Hanging, I guess that means?"

"You know the penalty of murdering and plundering on this frontier."

"Give me just five minutes to decide."

"You shall have ten," and all faces brightened up, for at last it seemed that one traitor to the League had been found.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

YANKEE ZEKE.

The Cowboy Chief arose from his seat and went over to speak to Colonel Forsythe, and the two conversed together in a low tone, while Yankee Zeke sat with his face in his hands as though buried in deep and painful meditation.

At last he raised his head quickly and asked:

"Pard Taylor, can it be so arranged as to be believed by my comrades that I am dead?"

"I reckon so."

"Couldn't you give me a chance to escape, say, so I could tell the boys I thought I'd make a try, and when I get out at night have a shot fired, and the sentinel call out that a prisoner had escaped and he killed him, so my comrades could hear it?"

"Yes, I'll arrange that for you," said the adjutant eagerly.

"Then it will be thought I was dead, you know, and the Avenger of the League won't look for me to put me to death by torment."

"Ahl you have an avenger then?"

"Yes, but no one knows who he is, and his duty is to spy on us and kill traitors."

"But if it could be said I was dead, you know, it would be all right."

"And you would confess?"

"A horse, saddle and bridle?"

"Yes."

"Blankets, and a week's provisions?"

"Yes."

"A belt of arms and a rifle?"

"Yes."

"And a soldier suit to play army courier, for I would shave off my beard and cut my hair close."

"Yes."

"And papers to protect me until I got a long way from Texas?"

"Certainly," said Buck Taylor after a glance at Colonel Forsythe who nodded.

"And fifteen hundred dollars?"

"No, I said one thousand."

"Make it five hundred more, pard."

"No."

"Remember, I take my life in my hands, and it's not too much to start life on in a foreign land, for I would not dare remain in America."

"All right," said Buck Taylor, after another glance toward the colonel.

"Fifteen hundred?"

"Yes."

"Well, pard, just let the plan be arranged for my escape, and when I get out you can hide me away until I can write down all the laws of the League, the signs, and draw the maps, give you the passwords and grips."

"Then I'll get away with all the speed a horse can take me, for I want you to understand that you have not captured one fifth of the band of Tigers, and there may be in this very fort the avenger now, fearing some of us may betray them."

"See?"

"At last," muttered Buck Taylor to himself, as he felt that they had found a traitor to break through the barrier that had thus far surrounded all the members of the secret and mysterious League.

The prisoner was then taken to the quarters where the others had been placed, and was greeted by his comrades right cordially, as he had just come out of the hospital.

So he told them that he thought he had a plan of escape that would work for all, and that he would try it that very night.

"If I get out and find the stockade unguarded, as I believe it will be at the point I have in mind, I'll come back and guide you all there."

"The stables where the horses of the officers are kept is near, and we can get away in good shape."

So he arranged it and all were eager for the night to come.

The colonel, Doctor Schufeldt, the adjutant and Buck Taylor meanwhile were discussing the affair at headquarters, and all were quite jubilant over the circumstance of having at last found a traitor to a League that, from the man's own admission was becoming most powerful, as he had said that not one fighter of the band had been killed and captured.

The adjutant suggested a plan to have a bogus attempt at escape before "taps," and went off to arrange it with the officer of the day, so that he could post his sentinels accordingly.

When night came all was arranged, and a room in the adjutant's quarters was gotten ready for the prisoner, while the horse and outfit, and the money, with the papers to give him protection as a courier as far as Colorado, were written and signed.

When night came Yankee Zeke got his comrades about him and in a low tone held a conversation with them.

They listened eagerly to him, and at last he was ready to make the attempt to escape.

He climbed up to one of the windows, crawled through, and with a rope made of blankets, lowered himself to the ground, a distance of some thirty feet, for the prisoners were confined in the second story of a log-house built for a lock-up, and which had windows up near the roof.

All waited eagerly when there came a loud challenge:

"Halt! who goes there!"

"Halt!"

Then a shot followed, a wild cry was heard, followed instantly by the cry:

"Corporal of the guard! Post Number Ten!"

And the listening prisoners heard the rapid tread of feet with these words:

"A prisoner attempting to escape, sir, and I shot him, as he ran at my command to balt!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE TRAITOR.

YANKEE ZEKE was by no means dead.

The bogus escape and the ruse to have it appear real had passed without a hitch.

He had gone to the adjutant's quarters with that officer, who was waiting for him.

The sentinel had been one who was detailed for the work, and was none other than Doctor Schufeldt, while the one who ran to the spot was Buck Taylor.

The officer of the day had given orders to the sergeant of the guard that the alarm was not to be sounded, when the shot was heard, nor any attention paid to it.

So there was no confusion or excitement among the guard.

Taken to the quarters of the adjutant, Yankee Zeke was seen to be trembling as though in great fright.

Buck Taylor soon arrived with Surgeon Schufeldt, and then the adjutant said:

"Compose yourself, man, sit down to the table there, where you will find all material for your work."

"Your horse is ready for you, and I have your money here safe, while Buck Taylor will give you your traps and escort you beyond all sentinels."

"Come, take this glass of whisky, and it will brace you up."

"We will be next door, so when you get your work completed call us."

Yankee Zeke drank the liquor with evident satisfaction.

Then, when left alone, he sat down to the table and began to draw a map.

He was a skillful penman and did fine work.

He drew several maps, making notes at the bottom.

Then he began to write and filled up half a dozen pages.

Next he filled a page with a number of hieroglyphics, and ended with the drawing of a five-pointed star, in the center of which was a tiger couchant, and in the points the lettering:

"TEXAS TIGERS."

Then he arose, took another glass of whisky, and knocked upon the door leading into the other room.

It was opened at once, and the traitor seemed wholly unnerved.

"There it is, and I'll go over it all with you to explain."

"Then, for God's sake! gentlemen, let me go my way, for I feared I saw the avenger gazing at me through that open window."

"Nonsense! the window is eight feet from the ground," the adjutant said.

"He might have been on horseback."

"No one on horseback could get there."

"He might have climbed up and—"

"There is nothing for him to climb on, and besides, the avenger you fear could never get into the fort."

"Ah, sir, you do not know, for he may be a soldier, a scout, one of Buck Taylor's own Cowboy Clan, yes, even an officer, for the band is a secret one, and there are men in it of whom you would little dream."

"Have you given the names?"

"We know them, sir, only by numbers."

"And how many are there in the League?"

"Two hundred and fifty, sir."

"Ab! so many as that?"

"Here, sir, I will go over my confession here with you."

The adjutant acted as leader, and asked:

"Well, what do these maps mean?"

and he is to be found there or at any one of these two marked places, for these couriers know how to reach him.

"Here are the trails to the retreats, and now I come to the secret signs, grips and passwords."

"You see, sir, this star is our badge, and, when two of the Tigers meet, they readily recognize their membership to the League though they may be strangers to each other, for they have a certain sign, here it is, that must be made whenever they meet a stranger."

It would only be noticed by one of the band, see, sir?"

"Yes, and what else?"

The man nervously went on with his confession until it was finished, and then he was given some supper and the money was paid over to him, after which Buck Taylor called in the post barber and had him shaved, and his hair cut close to his head.

"There is your uniform, so put it on and come with me," said the Cowboy Chief.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

IN AMBUSH.

BUCK TAYLOR led the man away from the cabin-quarters of the adjutant, by a route that would avoid the sentinels, and any one who happened to be out about the grounds, as much as possible.

He was allowed to make an exit of the stockade with horse and rider, by giving the countersign to the sentinel at what was known as the "officers' gate," and thus passed on to the trail in the valley, from where the prairie stretched away for many a mile.

"Here I leave you, Yankee Zeke, and it is contrary to my wish that you go until it is known that you have not played us false, for I look upon you as a very slippery fellow."

"You don't mean to say, Pard Taylor, that I would play you false after you have given me my very life, so much money, a complete outfit for a journey and treated me as you have?" said the man reproachfully.

"The adjutant trusts you, but if I do not I cannot help it."

"But you are free now, only let me say this one thing to you."

"Yes, pard."

"If you play me false you will find me as deadly a foe on your trail as that League Avenger you seem to stand in such awe of."

"Do you hear?"

"I do, and accept the consequences."

"I thank you, Buck Taylor, and I wish you good luck in life."

"Good-by."

The man held out his hand, and the Cowboy Chief hesitated an instant before he took it.

Then he did so and said:

"Good-by, Yankee Zeke, and try and live honest, for it's just as easy as to go wrong."

The man made no reply, and mounting his horse rode away in the darkness, leaving Buck Taylor looking after him.

When he had gotten some distance away so as to be out of sight in the darkness, he halted, hitched his horse to a tree and crept back on the trail.

He did not see the Cowboy Chief, so hastened on up toward the fort until he heard the sharp challenge of the sentinel at the gate through which they had come out of the grounds:

"Halt! who comes there?"

"Friend, with the countersign," was the response in the voice of Buck Taylor.

"Advance, friend, and give the countersign!" came the next command, and then the Tiger turned on his heel and walked rapidly back to where he had left his horse.

"I am not followed, as I feared I would be, for that Buck Taylor is as cunning as a wolf," he muttered to himself.

Mounting, he rode on at a canter for some distance, musing to himself as he did so.

"This is a fine horse, and they kept faith with me clear through."

"I am free, that is certain, and I've got a fine animal under me, a good outfit and fifteen hundred dollars in my pocket."

"Well, I am not bad off, at any rate."

"I'll hold on as I am until near dawn and then go into camp."

This he did, and it was some two hours before daybreak when he rode into a timber

motte upon the banks of a small stream and went into camp.

He staked out his horse, spread his blankets, and was soon fast asleep.

The sun shining in his face awoke him, and he discovered that he had slept some four hours.

He awoke hungry, but first watered his horse at the stream and staked him out on a fresh range.

Then he gathered some wood and was about to build a fire when his horse gave a low neigh.

Instantly he was on the alert, and rifle in hand gazed out over the prairie.

Soon there came in sight a horseman, and behind him trotted an animal bearing a large pack.

"He is not so dangerous looking after all."

"Some peddler going the rounds of the forts and settlements, and he's plucky to take the chances he does."

"Well, I see no reason why I should not own his pack, for it is more or less valuable, and he must have considerable money about him."

"Then his horses are good ones from their look."

"I am really in luck, and must not spoil it by neglecting the chances thrown in my way."

"I will kill him and then get breakfast, for I have nothing to hurry me just now, unless that terrible fellow, Buck Taylor, should take a notion to follow my trail after all, though I hardly think he will."

Thus mused the man; plotting with the utmost coolness the killing of a fellow-being, and robbing him.

His horse was upon the other side of the timber so could not be seen, and a dense thicket just then concealed him from view.

The trail the stranger was following would bring him within fifty feet of the thicket, and here Yankee Zeke stationed himself, rifle in hand to await the coming of his victim.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

TWO OF A KIND.

THE man in ambush was as cool as though he was waiting for a friend.

Had he been lying in wait for a deer to come within easy range of his rifle he could not have been more composed.

He knew that his victim would fall, the horses in flight trot away a short distance, and then could be readily caught.

The idea that he should miss his man or lose his game never occurred to him, any more than did the thought of the consequences if discovered, or a compunction of conscience enter his soul.

Nearer and nearer came the unsuspecting man, and he was within one hundred yards of his death, when suddenly the assassin started, rubbed his eyes and said aloud:

"By Heaven, but it is!"

He looked the harder, then lowered his rifle and said vehemently:

"It is Jew Jim!"

Instantly he stepped out from his shelter into full view, and the moment he did so the horseman's rifle was unslung and came up threateningly.

He had been peering cautiously at the thicket though he did not suspect an ambush there.

Still he was suspicious, which showed that he was a very wide-awake peddler.

And thus the two men stood an instant, when Yankee Zeke again muttered:

"I am not mistaken, for it is Jew Jim."

"But I'll soon know."

With this he bent over and laid his rifle upon the ground, across the trail.

The other at once slung his weapon at his back.

Yankee Zeke then raised his right hand above his head.

The stranger raised his left.

The next movement of Yankee Zeke was to raise his left hand, and in response up went the right hand of the stranger.

Then in a loud voice Yankee Zeke called out:

"The Tiger is—"

"My friend, not my foe," answered the stranger, completing the sentence.

Instantly both men moved toward each other, and Yankee Zeke now held up his left hand, and the other did likewise.

As they neared each other the palms of their hands were turned outward, so as to be seen.

This completed the telegraphing they had gone through with, and Yankee Zeke called out:

"Ho, Jew Jim, I am glad to see you."

"I thought you were dead."

"It's the same opinion I had of you, Pard Zeke, for I recognize you now," was the answer.

"No, not so bad as that, though it came uncomfortably near it."

"But you escaped in the fight at the canyon?"

"Yes, with the chief; but I am as hungry as a grizzly bear, and was coming here to camp for breakfast."

"Got anything cooked?"

"No, I was just about making a fire when I saw you, and concluded to rope you in as a rich haul."

"Then I recognized you, I thought, though you have trimmed off your flowing locks."

"Yes, and you have changed so, your voice only betrayed you."

"Well, stake out your beasts while I build a fire."

"I've got grub in plenty, but if you carry any delicacies, trot them out."

"After we have befriended our stomachs, we can talk over matters."

Jew Jim at once obeyed, and by the time he had unsaddled and staked out his horses, Yankee Zeke had a fire built, and water brought from the stream.

A frying-pan was then put on the fire, with some sliced bacon in it, the coffee-pot was now sending forth a delicious fragrance, and Jew Jim threw on the coals a large venison steak, and got out of his pocket a dozen crackers.

They ate their breakfast with a relish born of hunger, and then lighting their pipes, were ready for a talk.

"Now, Jew Jim, tell me how it is that you have turned peddler?"

"I will do so in a few words, Pard Zeke."

"I was near the chief in the fight, when he saw that he could not beat off that devil, Buck Taylor, and his Clan, so he said to me to make a dash with him for the horses, and break through the line."

"We did so, and some eight or ten others started with us."

"The chief and four of us got through, and then we had a race for life."

"We crossed the river and went to the home of a Mexican, who is the chief's friend, and who has a daughter, by the way, that I think has won Tiger Tom from the beautiful Queen Valerie."

"Impossible!"

"I think not; but that is in the future."

"I was wounded, so was another of the four, as also the chief."

"But we got well rapidly, and started upon separate trails," and Jew Jim told just what each man's duty was, and added:

"Now, I was to turn peddler, and so I purchased an outfit in the town, and have already been to Fort S—."

"From there I started for Round-top Post, though all told me there would surely be a Jew missing if I did so."

"There is not a man of us at Fort S—, but I knew there were a number at Round-top, and my idea was to rescue them, don't you see."

"I am now on my way there."

"And I just left there," was the quiet response of Yankee Zeke.

CHAPTER XL.

A CLEVER SCAMP.

"You have just left Round-top?" asked Jew Jim, in surprise.

"Yes."

"Escaped?"

"Well, they thought so much of me they let me go."

"What do you mean, Zeke?"

"I got a chance to leave on certain conditions, and took advantage of them."

"There are some of our men there?"

"Oh, yes; there were twenty-one prisoners taken, seven of which were severely wounded, and others more or less seriously."

"Four of the boys died of their wounds,

though I will say that the surgeon, Doctor Schufeldt, did all in his power for us."

"Yes, to get you well to hang you."

"Maybe, for the other boys will hang if they don't escape, and Rafael, the Mexican, died just before I left, I heard."

"And how was it that you got away?"

"Well, it was hang or confess, so I confessed."

"What! you betrayed the League?"

"It took me just two hours to write down all I had to say."

"Traitor!" and quick as a flash the revolver of Jew Jim was leveled at the head of Yankee Zeke.

But Yankee Zeke did not change a muscle, and simply said:

"Don't be so rapid, Jew Jim, for you are too previous."

"Lower your revolver and I will tell you all about it."

"No, I shall keep you covered, for if you have turned traitor, you know that I will kill you."

"Don't be a fool, Jew Jim, for I am no more of a traitor than are you."

"You said so."

"Oh, no, I simply said that it took me two hours to write down all I wished to confess."

"Now, the boys were all taken singly to headquarters and given a choice between hanging or betraying the League.

"As an inducement, they were offered a thousand dollars, their pardons, an outfit and a horse."

"You see what a good outfit I got?"

"As a traitor?"

"Oh, no, I am no fool, am no traitor."

"But I have a heap of hard horse sense, and when I got the chance to save my neck and make money, I did so."

"By treachery," and Jew Jim still held his revolver so as to cover his comrade should he make a hostile movement.

Yankee Zeke laughed and said:

"You know the boys called me the author, because I could write sketches and poems, and read them to them in camp?"

"Yes, and actor, too, as you recited well."

"Yes, I was an actor once, a super, but fell in love with the star; and her husband, for she was married, did not like the poetry I dedicated to her, and one night it came to a quarrel, then a blow, and then—well, I killed him."

"That was how I never became a Booth, for my act necessitated my hasty departure for Texas—see?"

"Oh, yes."

"When I heard the terms offered by the commanding officer at Round-top, I struck for more money than a thousand, and got it."

"I acted my part as though I was in great terror, told of the Avenger of the League, and how there were two hundred and fifty members in the band."

"You see my talent as an author here came in well to aid me in lying—see?"

"Yes, I see."

"I then planned that if I could be allowed to appear to escape, have a shot fired and the sentinel say, in the hearing of my comrades, that I was killed, I would confess all."

"So this was agreed to, and I told the boys when I went back my little game, and all passed off well."

"Then I was taken to the adjutant's quarters, and I wish you could see the maps I drew, the hieroglyphics and directions I wrote out, with countersigns and a lot of other stuff."

"I played my part well, and Buck Taylor and his Cowboy Clan, I guess, will start upon the trail to-day to capture the other two hundred."

"I tell you, Jew Jim, it was great, and it went, for I was given my money and outfit, and Buck Taylor escorted me clear of the post, and I went back on the trail to see that he was not following me, for he was suspicious of me, I could see."

"Did he follow you?"

"No, he returned to the post, for I heard the sentinel challenge him and his answer to it."

"He is mighty sly."

"Yes, but I do not think he followed me, for had he done so, he would have been in sight by this time; but you are going to Round-top?"

"Yes."

"Then you are the very man to aid our pards to escape, and I can tell you just how it can be done."

"I am all ears, Pard Zeke, for that is what I am going for."

"The boys are imprisoned in a newly-built lock-up, upon the second floor, and with windows near the roof; but the window is large enough to crawl through, for I did it, and there is no one there as large as I am."

"From the window to the ground is some twenty-five to thirty feet, and a lariat can let them down, so you are to sell them something you can get a lariat hidden away in."

"There is no sentinel on the hillside, where I got out, and it is a straight way to the stockade-wall, over which the men can easily climb."

"They know where the horse corral is, at the bottom of the hill, and though there is a corporal and four men on duty there, only one is on post at a time, and he just at the gate, so, approaching him through the corral, from among the horses, he can easily be surprised and knifed—see?"

"I see, and it shall be done," was the decided response of Jew Jim.

CHAPTER XLI

A WOMAN ON THE TRAIL.

FOR a long time the two men talked together over a plan to rescue their comrades, from what they supposed would be death by hanging.

It seemed like an easy matter under the circumstances, the hardest undertaking being that of getting the horses out of the corral without alarming the guard.

If they escaped on foot, without food and arms, their sufferings would be great indeed before they could find succor.

But on horseback they could push their animals hard to the Rio Grande, and crossing by dawn, be safe upon Mexican territory.

If the sentinel on post at the corral could be silently dealt with, the corporal and his other three men would slumber serenely on, awaiting to be aroused by their comrade on duty.

Such was the situation that Jew Jim was to master, and he was to be most careful not to be caught in attempting to aid the prisoners.

"Well, Zeke, I think I have got all of the plan in my head, so will go on now for the fort."

"The first thing to do is to get a chance to tell the prisoners something, and of course they will know me and help me out all they can."

"I have a neatly-coiled lariat for sale, so will put it in the crown of a sombrero, with a note to the boys telling just what they are to do."

"Now, what will you do?"

"I will go on my way, to await at the rendezvous you say the chief appointed with you."

"It will be best, for if they caught you no power could save you after your deception of them."

"I am well aware of that, and—Great Caesar's ghost! we are surprised!"

Both men sprung to their feet as the sound of rapid hoofs fell upon their ears.

But just then there dashed into sight four horses, three of them having riders.

"It is the Queen!" cried Yankee Zeke, as his eyes fell upon the rider in the lead.

It was indeed the Cattle Queen, Valerie Tracey, splendidly mounted upon a jet-black horse, and dressed in the costume of a Mexican lady.

She was armed, too, and rode ahead of her two escorts, who followed some twenty paces behind her, and had a pack-horse in lead.

She had discovered the horses staked out in the edge of the timber, and had turned from her trail to see who the riders were.

As she drew rein she recognized the two men as members of Tiger Tom's League, in spite of their changed appearance.

They greeted her with marked respect, and Yankee Zeke said:

"You surprised us, Lady Captain; but we are delighted to see you, as we have much to tell you."

"You are Yankee Zeke, I believe?"

"Yes, lady."

"And you are Jew Jim?"

"I am, lady."

"Numbers Forty-four and Forty-seven?"

"The same, lady."

"Where are you last from, and whither are you going?"

Yankee Zeke told his story as it was, and the woman listened with the deepest attention.

Then she said with a laugh:

"You are a most clever villain, Yankee Zeke, and you planned so well that an hour ago, from yonder high point, we saw Buck Taylor at the head of forty of his Cowboy Clan, going, as they believe, to the scenes you mapped out for them."

"I am glad then that Buck Taylor and his Clan of Cowboys have left the fort, lady, for it will be that much easier for Jew Jim to attempt the rescue of our comrades."

"Now, Jew Jim, I will hear your story."

The man related it as it is known to the reader.

Valerie bit her lips nervously as he told of the chief, but made no remark regarding him.

After a moment of silence she said:

"I, too, am on the trail, for I was going to Round-top to attempt to rescue the prisoners, as I was determined they should not die."

"Dagger Don is off upon a mission for me, and there are my two cowboy escorts, and I can be of service to you, Jew Jim, for I will go on at once to the fort."

"It is my intention to ask to have a talk with each of the men, to learn all I can from them about the pretended death of Tiger Tom."

"I shall find means to slip a note into the hand of one of them, making the night of escape the third from this."

"As for a rope to get out with, they can use what you did, Yankee Zeke."

"I will not remain longer at the fort than to-morrow, and you, Jew Jim, can come there to-night."

"When the men escape, let them scatter, and each one come to the old Mission Ranch."

"They can press their horses as hard as they please, to get as far off as possible from the fort, and then turn them loose, for there must not be a single trail leading to my ranch."

"They must come there on foot—do you understand?"

"Yes, lady."

"I will send out after the horses, if they can be found, but the men must come on foot, and when riding must make toward the Rio Grande, for I wish no suspicion to fall upon me."

"You, Yankee Zeke, are to go to the ranch and await my coming; but go afoot."

"Yes, lady."

"Now I will go on my way, and you follow by nightfall, Jew Jim," and she dashed away with her escort.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE COLONEL'S FAIR GUEST.

COLONEL FORSYTHE was talking over with his adjutant the anticipated wiping out of the League of the Texas Tigers, by Buck Taylor and his Cowboy Clan, who had departed that morning on the trail to carry out the instructions of Yankee Zeke, when his orderly announced a lady visitor to see him.

The colonel at once bade the orderly to have her enter, supposing that it was one of the officers' wives or daughters attached to the command.

But instead there swept into the room a woman of wondrous beauty, of both face and form.

She wore a velvet habit, profusely embroidered with silver, and ornamented with little bell buttons, while a sombrero covered her head and was also decorated handsomely.

About her slender waist was a red sash, but half hiding a belt in which were two revolvers, and in her gauntlet-gloved hand she carried a whip with a solid gold Tiger's head at the end of the handle.

The colonel bowed low while he mentally asked the question:

"From whence came this wondrously beautiful creature?"

"I have the honor to address Colonel Forsythe, the commanding officer, I presume?" was asked in the sweetest of voices.

"I am Colonel Forsythe, madam; pray be seated, and let me know how I can serve you?"

"Permit me to introduce myself as Valerie Tracey, sir, the wife of the man you know as the Tiger of Texas—in other words," and she spoke bitterly now:

"I am the *Tigress of Texas*."

"My dear Mrs. Tracey, I am really glad to meet you, and I assure you I am not one to visit the sins of the guilty upon the innocent."

"Permit me to present my adjutant, Captain Wells, Mrs. Tracey?"

The adjutant made the most graceful bow of his life, while the lady bent her haughty head with a cordial smile.

She took the seat proffered her and then said:

"I have come here, Colonel Forsythe, with an escort of two of my cowboys, to see if you would allow me to have an interview with the prisoners you hold, who were known as the *Tigers of Texas*?"

The colonel's look asked for further information, a reason, perhaps, and reading it aright, Valerie Tracey continued:

"My object is to question them separately to see if they can give me any clew to the strange conduct of my husband in pretending to be dead when he was yet alive."

"He deserted me for some strange reason that I seek to discover, and left me to mourn him dead, to visit his grave and sorrow there."

"Then, as you may have been told by the Cowboy Chief, his grave was found to be empty, and he was alive and plotting some act of lawlessness I fear."

"He has not given me his confidence, and so I am now here to learn why, if I can."

"When I know, then can I act as I deem best, for then shall I be mistress of the ranch, and he shall never more darken its doors."

"I have loved him, I confess, as few women possess the power of loving, but I am revengeful, and can hate with a passion equally as strong."

"Now, Colonel Forsythe, you know why I am here to ask of you, a stranger, one who has reason to dread the *Tigress of Texas*, as the wife of Tiger Tom, the favor I do."

Colonel Forsythe had listened with the deepest attention to all the lovely woman had said, and then replied:

"I am more than willing to grant your request, Mrs. Tracey; but let me say now that I am keeping house with Major Turner and his wife, and you are to be our guest as long as you are pleased to remain, for Mrs. Turner will be glad to welcome you, and I will ask Captain Wells to be good enough to ask her to come here and meet you."

"I am most grateful, sir, but I think I had best see the men and return at once."

"No, for night will overtake you before you can go very far—"

"I camped on the trail last night, sir, and have no fear."

"No, you must remain here to-night, at least, for you need rest— Ah! here is Mrs. Turner," and a sweet-faced, motherly-looking lady entered with Adjutant Wells.

She was introduced by the colonel and greeted the fair visitor in a cordial manner, that showed she had heard from the adjutant a few words of her story, and then led her away with her, the colonel saying that she should see the prisoners at his quarters after she had rested and dinner was over.

Two hours after, one by one the prisoners entered the colonel's quarters, and at the request of Mrs. Tracey the commandant and his adjutant were both present.

The keen eyes of Colonel Forsythe noted that it was only occasionally that a man seemed to recognize her, and this was shown by a start at seeing her there.

With two she shook hands, and keen-eyed as was the colonel, he failed to see that she left in the palm of one a slip of paper.

Her questions to all were about the same, for she tried to find out how they discovered that their chief was not dead, and why he had deserted her.

But they could only answer that they had received word to assemble at the canyon,

why they knew not, and Tiger Tom had given them no explanation of his conduct.

"Colonel Forsythe, I thank you," she said, softly, when the last man had been questioned, and had departed with his guard.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE JEW PEDDLER.

VALERIE TRACEY dined with Colonel Forsythe, Major Turner, his wife, and the adjutant and Surgeon Schufeldt.

All were charmed with her beauty, while she fairly fascinated them with her wit and brilliancy.

She sung for them several ballads, showing that she possessed a superb voice, while her touch on the keys was exquisite.

"I have my own piano even in a frontier home," she said.

Later in the evening an orderly appeared to say that the officer of the day reported the arrival of a Jew peddler, who requested to be allowed to sell his wares at the post.

"I only hope he has what I wish," Mrs. Turner said, and as she remarked that a number of ladies were in need of little things not to be found at the sutler's, the colonel granted the permission, and the peddler was told to put in an appearance first at headquarters.

Soon after he arrived with his pack.

He bowed obsequiously to the colonel, the ladies and the officers present, and said with an accent that was ludicrous:

"I vas bleased to knows you so I vas, and I danks you, generals, for t'e kind permissions I vas haf to sell mine goots.

"Dey vas so cheap, and so nice, and I vas lucky I don't got 'em stole and minself scalp, don't you know?"

"No, I don't know how you did escape, if you came here alone."

"I vas all alone py myselfes, mit my riding-horse, and my pack-horse, generals, and I don't get scalped, don't you know?"

"So I see; but where are you from?"

"I vas a Jew scout, generals, v'at knows t'e prairies, so I vas turn peddler, don't you know, and hopes to make some monish, generals."

"He has promoted you, colonel," said Mrs. Turner, laughingly.

"Yes, he is kinder to me than the Secretary of War is pleased to be," was the response.

"Well, Mister—"

"My name vas Isaac Jacobs, generals."

"Well, Mr. Jacobs, show your wares to the ladies, and I do not doubt many others at the post will patronize you liberally; but if you ever get back to civilization in safety with your money, you will surprise me."

"I vas not such a fools as I looks, generals, for when I sees anypodies v'at vos pad mans, I don't let t'em see mine pack horse, don't you know, and I keeps mine eyes vide awake for beoples."

The pretended Jew then opened his pack, and Mrs. Turner made a number of little purchases, while Valerie bought a set of jewelry and a silk handkerchief for the negress at old Mission Ranch, and which she knew Liza would appreciate most fully.

Then from quarters to quarters went the peddler, at each house selling his wares readily, until taps sounded, when he was given a roosting-place in an unoccupied room.

Jew Jim's eagle eyes had taken in the situation most thoroughly.

He had been on the watch for all he could discover, of use to him in the contemplated rescue, and he was out bright and early looking around for buyers.

He had no trouble finding them, and he took up his stand near the lock-up, and the prisoners soon sent word they wished to make some purchases, also.

"What is them fellows afther wanting with anything, for they won't nade them, as they'll be hanged before long," said an Irish corporal.

"Let 'em buy what they want, if the officer of the day says so," the sergeant remarked.

So the Jew was accordingly taken up to the prisoners' quarters, as the captain said he had no objections, and he sold a sombrero to one man who had lost his, some tobacco to several, and a few other things.

And in the crown of the sombrero was a coiled lariat and a letter.

So far Jew Jim had done well, and by night he had nearly sold out all his packs contained.

He had strolled about the post, noted the window in the lockup, through which the prisoners would have to make their escape, and the stockade they would have to climb.

He saw that, built upon the side of the steep hill, the lockup was two stories in the rear, and only one fronting the grounds, and here stood the sentinel, guarding the entrance.

In the rear the windows were just under the roof, as also on the sides, so there was no need of a guard there, it was thought, as it was believed the prisoners supposed there were sentinels placed around the house. Yankee Zeke having been fired upon, or pretended to have been, and killed.

Every point of disadvantage and of vantage Jew Jim took in, and then he noted the position of the corral.

His horses had been taken there, so he went to see after them, and he noted that the sentinel stood at the gate of the corral, on the inside, under a wicky-up that afforded him shelter.

Some hundred feet away there was a small hut where the corporal and the rest of the guard were housed, and Jew Jim muttered to himself:

"I can fix him and not alarm the guard, I am sure."

"I must get my permit to leave after night sets in, and I can come before sunset and have my horses hitched inside the corral so as to get them easily."

"Yes, the men must go free before twenty-four hours."

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE SENTINEL.

IT was afternoon when Mrs. Tracey expressed a desire to have her escort called, as she wished to start upon her return to her ranch.

Mrs. Turner, who had taken a great fancy to the lovely woman, and had deepest sympathy for her, urged her longer stay, as did the major and Colonel Forsythe.

But she said that she had left only the negress and a couple of cowboys in charge of the ranch, and was anxious to return.

She remembered that she had seen something in the Jew's stock she wished to purchase, so he was sent for at once.

That any signs passed between them no one noticed, and yet Mrs. Tracey seemed quite pleased after she had bought what she wished.

"Should you come by old Mission Ranch, sir, I shall be glad to make other purchases of you, which I cannot carry with me," she said.

"V'ere vas t'e olt Mission Ranches, meeshy?" asked Jew Jim.

Mrs. Tracey explained the trails he was to take, and he remarked:

"Vell, maybe I comes; but if it vas not now, it vill pe another times."

Soon after the *Tigress of Texas*, as she had seen fit to call herself, bade Mrs. Turner good-by, and was lifted to the saddle by the colonel, who said:

"I will gladly send an escort with you, Mrs. Tracey, if you will permit me to do so?"

"No, thank you, sir, for I have little to fear, as my husband's band would not molest me, and my horse can outrun any Indian pony in Texas."

"Then, too, I have two skilled and brave prairie-men with me."

"Well, Mrs. Tracey, I wish you well, and pardon me if I say that I am glad you are rid of your wicked husband, whose career of crime you have not the remotest conception of."

"When he is in his grave you will no longer live under a shadow."

"Good-by, and a safe journey to you."

She grasped his outstretched hand, and rode away, followed by her cowboy escort and pack-horse.

Later, Jew Jim came to the colonel to ask leave to depart that night.

"Why go at night, my man?"

"You see, generals, I vas not so scared at night of sneeting folks v'at would kill me, don't you know?"

"I vas sleep mit t'e daytimes und travels at night-times, don't you know?"

"All right; the adjutant will give you the permit to get your horses out of the corral, and depart to-night; but you must leave before taps."

"I vas thank you, generals," and the man went to the adjutant for his permit.

With this he went to the corral and caught his horses, hitching them near the stockade gate, and stating to the sentinel to please say to the relief at eight, that he was coming for his animals later on, at the same time showing him his permit and making him a present of a silk handkerchief.

It was just half-past eight when he shoudered his packs, and bidding farewell to the soldiers of the guard-house, was let out of the stockade gate and made his way to the corral, an eighth of a mile distant.

"If Irish Mike is on duty, Friend Jacobs, he will kill you, for he always challenges with a shot, until we are afraid to approach him," called out a soldier.

With this dubious announcement he went on his way through the darkness.

"Taps" sounded before he reached the corral, and he knew that the corporal and his men would turn in then, if they had not already done so.

After waiting some little while he approached the sentinel and was promptly halted, and he halted, too, with great promptness.

"Halt! who comes there?"

"I vas your best fri'nt, Mister Isaac Jacobs, don't you know, my tear soldier mans."

Word had been given the man on duty that the Jew was to come for his horses, and to admit and pass him without the countersign.

So the soldier answered:

"All right; advance, friend!"

Jew Jim obeyed, and as he put his packs down near the sentinel, he said:

"Mine fri'nt, I vas gif you dis to remember me, don't you know?"

He handed him a handsome silk scarf which the unsuspecting soldier was greatly pleased with, for though he could not see its colors at night, he felt that it was large and a fine one.

"You are a clever fellow, and I thank you, sir," he said.

"Vell, I gif you dis smoking caps too."

"Let me show you how it vas put on by t'e German soldiers."

The soldier removed his cap, and suddenly down upon his head descended the hand of the Jew with crushing force, for it grasped a short bar of lead.

There was a sickening sound of crushing bone, and without a moan the soldier sunk down in his tracks.

The large gateway was locked, the soldier keeping the key, but this Jew Jim quickly possessed himself of, and entering the corral at once set to work catching the best horses he could find in the darkness.

His own were hitched near, and the others were placed alongside of them as fast as caught and bridled, for saddles Jew Jim decided not to worry about.

The contents of his packs had been so placed that they were quickly put in bags and strapped to his own saddle.

Then he went back to the gate and waited for the coming of the comrades whom he had gone there to rescue.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE ESCAPE.

THE prisoners had read the note, handed to one of their number by the Cattle Queen, and been prepared for the coming of the peddler, and also to be prepared to purchase a hat, in which instructions and a lariat would be found.

They had asked to see the peddler and had made the purchases, as has been said, after which they knew just what they were to do.

They bided their time until night, saving something from each meal, as they knew they would need food in their flight.

At last taps sounded and all was still in the fort.

The men bundled up their blankets and made them fast to their bunks.

Then two men braced themselves against

the wall, a third mounted to their shoulders and a fourth was aided upon the shoulders of number three, so that he was high enough to make the lariat fast in the window, the short end falling inside, the long end without.

Then the man in the window went through and lowered himself to the ground.

He had his instructions to keep straight on to the stockade and wait there.

Number Two followed next, and so on until the last man had drawn himself up by the lariat and lowered himself to the ground.

When the others began to come to the stockade the first man was raised up by his comrades and went over.

So the others were aided, two leaning far over and drawing up the last man.

Down the steep hillside they went to the corral.

Was Jew Jim there? was the question that they asked each other in whispers.

One man was to go forward first, and he wore his blanket over his shoulders so as to resemble an officer's cloak.

He approached with upright mien and quick tread, and for a moment Jew Jim was deceived.

But he recognized the cheat soon and so did not challenge, and a moment after the two men stood together.

"Go back and bring the men, for the horses are all ready waiting for them," said Jew Jim.

The man obeyed, and the others came one by one, and soon each man stood by the side of a horse.

They mounted at the low order of Jew Jim and followed through the stockade gates and on around the fence, in the opposite direction from the hut where the corporal and his men were peacefully sleeping, awaiting to be called by the sentinel when the hour of relief came round.

For half a mile Jew Jim led the way at a walk, for he wished no sounds to go back to the post.

"We have two hours before the relief goes on its rounds, pards, and in that time we can get far away.

"When we reach the main trails we will divide and scatter, and I will give you the orders the Cattle Queen bade me give you."

Then Jew Jim led the flight at a gallop, and the little cavalcade of fugitives, without arms or saddles, except what their rescuer had, went dashing along at a swift pace through the darkness.

A ride of several miles brought them to where the trail into which they had turned branched off into three, and here Jew Jim halted his men and said:

"Pards, the chief sent me to see if I could rescue you, and on my way I met Yankee Zeke; who had escaped, as you know, and while talking over matters, the Lady Captain appeared, on her way to the post to rescue you."

"She has gone back, and her orders are for you to ride toward the Rio Grande, turn your horses loose, and on foot come to her ranch."

"And the chief's orders?"

"Well, I am to meet the chief at the Canyon of Caverns, and I will see what orders he gives then to you; but how you are to go to old Mission Ranch, and on foot, so that you cannot be tracked there, and will be thought to have gone to Mexico."

"Now, pards, you have your orders, and we part here, for all of us must scatter, as by dawn we will have a big force upon our trails."

"It will be much safer for you to get rid of your horses, and I have some provisions here I can share with you, and I only regret that I have not some weapons also; but you must get to the ranch with all dispatch, and you know that there is an armory there, and a safe hiding-place, too."

The men talked together for a short while, and then went their separate ways, each urging his horse to his utmost speed, not caring how hard he rode him as he had to give him up by dawn.

And Jew Jim, realizing fully the danger he would be in if found, went at once along the main trail, which would carry him within a few miles of old Mission Ranch, and where, when he deserted his horse, he would not have so far to go on foot, for he was not fond of walking.

CHAPTER XLVI.

UNDER A WOMAN'S WILL.

VALERIE TRACEY was a rapid rider, and she kept her cowboy escort at a good pace until night came on, after leaving the fort.

Then she went into camp, and a small "A" tent, carried in the pack-saddle for her, was pitched, and supper gotten ready.

Then the woman retired to her tent, while one of the cowboys stood guard, the other wrapping himself in his blankets, to sleep until midnight.

Just before dawn Valerie Tracey came out of her tent, the horses were saddled, and at a gallop they went on their way, making some twelve miles before halting for breakfast.

At noon they reached old Mission Ranch, and found all safe there.

But there had been an arrival, so the negress said.

"But who?"

"The chief, Missy Val'rie."

"Has he dared come here again?"

"He were here at sunrise this morning, and fatched a pris'ner with him."

"A prisoner?"

"Yes, missy."

"Who?"

"I dunno, missy, only he tolle me ter give her inter your keepin', and say that you was to keep her safe until he came, or sent for her."

"It is a woman, then?"

"It's a young gal, missy, and if I does say it, she is just as pretty as you be."

"I knew it! I felt it! And he has dared to bring her here?"

"Yes, I will take charge of her—for myself."

With this the woman, her eyes flashing and with an angry look in them, went to the room where the negress had left the prisoner under lock and key.

She entered the room, closed the door behind her, and it was fully an hour before she came out again.

When she did so her face had changed from its angry expression, her eyes no longer flashed fire.

The day passed away, and soon toward nightfall a man was seen far off on the prairie coming toward the ranch.

He was on foot, and seemed to be carrying a pack upon his shoulders.

Soon after darkness fell he came up the steep trail to the ranch, and Valerie walked to the stockade gate to meet him.

"Well, Jew Jim, I am glad you have come."

"You have made a quick ride of it; but what about the others?"

"They all escaped, Lady Captain, and scattered at the trails, so they should be dropping in during the night and in the morning, and will be, for they are unarmed and have little food for taking their time."

"Well, I am glad of their escape, and they can quarter in the cabin we call the barracks, down the hill there, until danger threatens, and then I will take them to a secure hiding-place."

"Now, you will have to keep hidden, too, as they doubtless know now at the fort that you were there only to rescue your comrades, and no Jew peddler."

"They found it out, Lady Captain, when the sentinel was discovered dead on his post—"

"Dead?" asked the woman in a tone of horror.

"Yes, Lady Captain, I killed him," was the cool reply.

"Jew Jim, why did you murder that poor soldier?"

"He was in my way, Lady Captain, and I put him aside."

"Could you not have aided the escape of the men without taking his life?"

"I could have done so, Lady Captain, I suppose, but it was safer to kill him and I did so."

"You have done very wrong, Jew Jim, and I am angry with you, as well as horrified at your act."

"Go to the barracks, sir, and I will send you your supper, and do not expect me to do ought to encourage wanton murder and cowardly action such as you have been guilty of."

"But, Lady Captain, I do not consider a life—"

"Silence! not a word of extenuation, sir, in defense of your cowardly crime."

"I admit that you have had a cruel master; but you are now under my command, not Tiger Tom's."

"Is he not chief now?"

"He is a deserter, and I am the chief now of the Tigers of Texas, as you will discover."

"Go, sir!"

Jew Jim slunk away from before the angry face and cutting words of the woman who made known to him that she was to rule the band in the future.

Later on in the night Yankee Zeke arrived, and he came on horseback, but he had muffled the hoofs of his horse so that they would make no track after leaving the main trail.

He was received by Mrs. Tracey, and also bidden to go to the barracks, where the cowboys had their quarters.

The next day the men who had escaped began to drop in one at a time, and by night every one of them had arrived, foot-sore, hungry and weary.

But they were warmly welcomed and well cared for by the Lady Captain, who upon the following morning arose to discover a company of cavalry coming toward the ranch at a trot.

To give warning to the men in the barracks, and get them into an underground hiding place in the old ruined chapel was the work of a few minutes only for the Lady Captain.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE PURSUIT.

IT was just midnight when the relief guard went on its rounds.

The corporal and his men in the hut were not detailed as sentinels, each night, but as a reserve, to be called on by the soldier on his post, if he needed aid.

So the relief marched down from the fort, and there came no challenge as they advanced.

What did it mean?

They could see no soldier on duty.

Could he have fallen to sleep?

Up to the gate they marched, and at once the body of the soldier was discovered.

The corporal and his men were hastily aroused, but could give no clew to the mysterious murder, and a man was sent at a run for the officer of the day.

That officer soon arrived with an extra guard, and lanterns were brought.

At once it was seen that the sentinel had been felled by a heavy blow on the head with some weapon.

There lay the handkerchief the Jew had given him, there were the packs of the peddler, and the tracks showed that a number of horses had been taken from the corral.

Then the alarm was sounded, the "long roll" resounded from the hilltop, and the officer of the day rode rapidly back to the post.

There paced the sentinel before the lock-up, but a quick glance within, by the aid of a lantern, revealed the fact that there was not a prisoner there.

The officer of the day then went with the adjutant to report to Colonel Forsythe.

That officer heard all that had occurred with a white, stern face, and then gave orders for Captain King to take his troop of cavalry and be all ready to start in pursuit within half an hour, following the trail with lanterns.

"And, captain, see if the trails go to the old Mission Ranch."

"I do not wish to suspect that cowboy woman of treachery, but if the trails go to her home, then she must be their friend, and perhaps was instrumental in their rescue."

"That Jew certainly was, and if he can be taken I would hang him at sight."

"I only wish Buck Taylor and his men were here now."

In just half an hour Captain King and fifty troopers rode away from the fort, two scouts bearing lanterns leading the way and following the trail at a brisk walk.

The fugitives had now a start of four hours, as Captain King knew, but they could, with the aid of lanterns, press on so as to be miles away from the fort when day dawned.

It was not yet daybreak when the troops

arrived at the spot where the fugitives had halted and then scattered.

The scouts soon reported what had been done to Captain King, who replied:

"Then we must await here until dawn, and then divide, for I'll send men on any trail they have left."

"Get your breakfast, men, and be ready to move at the first glimmer of light that shows us the trails."

This order was obeyed, and when the sun arose it revealed the troop broken up into nearly a score of squads, all following the trails of the fugitives.

It was much slower work picking up the trails than leaving them, as the fugitives had done, with their horses in a run.

But the troopers pressed on, and by night had come to where the trails could be no longer found.

They had all led toward the Rio Grande, and some had come together again.

There some dozen tired-out horses were picked up by the troopers of the different trailing squads, and all supposed that the fugitives had deserted their animals because they were utterly broken down, and had gone on foot the rest of the way to the Rio Grande.

The various squads, several of them having joined forces, went into camp for the night, and the next day pressed on to the ford of the Rio Grande, where Captain King had appointed a rendezvous for his troop.

By now all had come in and reported.

And all had the same story to tell, that they had followed the trail as far as the horses had gone, and had picked up the deserted animals, while they supposed that the riders had pressed on on foot to the river.

One trail, however, had turned off from the Rio Grande, and had gone back toward the interior, and it was the tracks made by but one horse.

Of course Captain King dared not cross with his troop into foreign territory, and so he took up the one trail leading back, and followed it until night.

The next morning he held on to it, until the horse was found, and the rider had gone his way on foot.

This was the horse of Jew Jim.

"Well, we cannot follow his trail afoot, that is certain, and now to find out what trails lead to the old Mission Ranch," said Captain King, for the scouts had said that they were not very far distant from the home of the Tigress of Texas.

And so it was that the troop started for the old Mission Ranch, where the reader is aware those they were in pursuit of were then in hiding.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE CATTLE QUEEN'S NERVE.

WHEN the Tigress of Texas received word that there was a company of soldiers far out upon the prairie, and coming toward the ranch, she did not show the least concern.

Her first act was to place the escaped prisoners in hiding, and then she passed into the room where the chief's captive was, and remained a short while.

Returning to the piazza, she seated herself, book in hand, with the most perfect coolness, and glanced through her glass out upon the prairie.

It was a cavalry troop, and they were coming along at a trot, and now but a short mile away from the ranch.

Her cattle and horses were seen feeding upon the prairie, not far from where the troopers had passed, and with them were four cowboys seated upon their horses and watching the soldiers.

Up the steep trail the troop came, and at their head rode Captain King.

Following him were his two scouts, and then his bugler.

Next came the first lieutenant at the head of his men, who were riding in fours, and further back was the second lieutenant.

It was a stirring sight to see the gallant soldiers on the quick march, and they appeared ready to meet friend or foe, and apparently more anxious to have it the latter.

Into the stockade-guarded grounds they passed, and halting his men, Captain King dismounted and walked toward the piazza where Mrs. Tracey so quietly sat.

He had been the officer of the day when she had arrived at the post, and had been most courteous to her, at once gaining her an interview with Colonel Forsythe.

She recognized him at a glance, and rising, said pleasantly:

"Captain King, I believe, sir?"

"Yes, Mrs. Tracey, and I have come here upon rather important business."

"Indeed, sir?"

"Is it aught that I can serve you in?"

"Well, perhaps you can, Mrs. Tracey."

"Before you tell me the nature of your mission, let me beg you to let your men go into camp, and I will send them a good breakfast, while there is plenty of food for their horses at the stables."

"But this is an imposition on you, Mrs. Tracey, that I cannot permit, for I have half a hundred men and fully seventy horses with me."

"I insist, sir, for provender is very cheap in Texas, you know, and I have a cook who will be only too happy to give the men a good early dinner, as it is getting late for breakfast, while yourself and officers I shall claim as my guests— Now, do not say no, for I will have my own way, so let your men go into camp."

"If you must have it so, I yield to orders from a superior always, Mrs. Tracey," said Captain King, with a smile, and he called out to the senior lieutenant to let the men camp, and that a man would be sent to show where feed for the horses could be gotten.

The lieutenants were then invited to the piazza and introduced to Mrs. Tracey, who had just returned from giving orders to the negress about dinner, and to the man of all work at the ranch to look to the feeding of the horses.

Mint juleps, deftly made by the fair hostess were then offered her guests; the three officers drinking her health, after which she said:

"I confess to some curiosity, Captain King, to know your mission here with an armed troop at your back?"

"To tell you, madam, of the escape of the Tigers who were our prisoners," was the almost blunt response.

"Their escape? Surely could so many men escape from an armed garrison of several hundred men?"

"They did, and most cleverly."

"And you were not able to overtake men who must have been on foot?"

"No, they escaped on horseback, for they stole from the corral a horse each."

"And your guards, sir?"

"The sentinel was killed, who guarded the corral."

"Killed! that is bad indeed."

"Yes; but you remember, Mrs. Tracey, the Jew peddler?"

"Yes, I made some purchases of him."

"Well, he, it seems, was the man who aided them, and must have been a member of the band."

"We traced the others to where they left their horses near the Rio Grande, having ridden them down; but the tracks of the peddler's horse, which my scouts had noted well, led us to within a few miles of this place."

"There we found his horse, and his trail led on foot in this direction, though the scouts were not able to pick it up after losing it a mile away."

"Strange, for I have not seen any Jew, Captain King."

"Then Mr. Isaac Jacobs is not here, Mrs. Tracey?"

"Mr. Isaac Jacobs is not here, Captain King."

"I am sorry, for I had hoped at least to capture and hang that fellow."

"You will have to look elsewhere for him, sir, than here; but may I ask if any news has been had at the fort of Tiger Tom?"

"None, for he fled to Mexico, and thither his men have gone to join him, and if they know what is good for them they had best never return; but what a pleasant house you have here, Mrs. Tracey."

"I like it, sir."

"And you live here all alone?"

"Just now I have a lady visiting me, Captain King, and I have my negro servant, a man to do chores about the ranch, and five cowboys, so I am not all alone, you see."

The conversation now became general, and

the hostess sung for her guests, quite winning their hearts.

Dinner was at last announced, and it was a meal that was a grand success, for Liza was proud of her culinary accomplishments.

If the officers expected to meet at table the "lady friend" who was visiting Mrs. Tracey, they were mistaken, for she did not appear.

After dinner, the Tigress gave her guests a fragrant cigar, and they sat upon the piazza for an hour or more smoking and talking.

The men had also been bounteously served by Liza, and at last when Captain King arose to depart he was urged to remain all night, but declined, and thanking their lovely hostess for her hospitality they mounted and rode away.

"Well, captain, what do you think?" asked Lieutenant Dalton.

"She knows no more about the escape of those devils, and where they are than I do."

"So I believe."

"And I," added the second lieutenant.

As they reached the main trail they came suddenly upon a band of horsemen.

"Buck Taylor's Clan," cried Captain King, and a few moments after the Cewboy Chief rode up.

"What news, Taylor?"

"I only know that Yankee Zeke could give those two Bible liars, Ananias and Sapphira odds and lay them out, for not a thing that he wrote down was the truth, and I am now hunting for him just to tell him so, that is all," was Buck Taylor's somewhat energetic response.

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE MIDNIGHT RAIDER.

IT is time to return now to the man who had created the trouble, which had caused so many men to be upon the hunt for him, and who were thirsting for his life.

He had, as is known, made up his mind to lay hidden by day, and go about only at night.

His visit to Valeric had affected him deeply, from some cause, yet he did not despair of some day winning her back.

Too marked a man to be seen and not known, and desirous that he should be considered as having fled to Mexico to remain, he could go by night, and if met by any one, fail to be recognized as Tiger Tom.

While lying hidden in the canyon, a sudden thought came to him that alone he could secure a large sum of money, while waiting to see what the result of his messengers' trips would be.

Having decided that he could make a grand hit, he at once resolved to carry out his plans, and as soon as it was dark he mounted his horse and rode away.

He took the trail leading toward the settlements, and rode steadily all through the night, with but few halts to rest his horse.

Before dawn he had sought a hiding-place he seemed to know well upon the banks of a swiftly-flowing stream, the sides of which were seamed with ravines.

There was water there, and grass, and plenty of wood.

So he built a fire away up one of the ravines, cooked an early breakfast, staked his horse out, and spreading his blankets, lay down to rest with no seeming fear of being disturbed.

All through the day he slept and rested; but just at nightfall mounted, and was soon again upon the trail.

The glimmer of a light appeared across the prairie after awhile, and as he drew near, a large house and its surrounding buildings loomed up before him.

He was riding slowly now, and was nearing the house, when behind him came the swish of hoofs rapidly approaching through the long prairie grass.

He turned in his saddle and saw a horse and rider approaching at a gallop.

But, save that he took his lariat from his saddle-horn, he made no other preparation of offense or defense.

Suddenly a voice called out:

"Ho, Brother Buck! you can't fool me, for I would know that tall form of yours the darkest night."

"It is ungallant not to wait for me."

He drew rein at once, and again came the voice:

"I was waiting at the cowboy camps for papa, but as he did not come, I decided to ride home.

"How are you, and how glad I am to see you."

As the rider uttered the last words, the horse came alongside of the one ridden by Tiger Tom, and instantly the lariat dropped over his head, while the man grasped the outstretched hand in a grasp of iron and said, sternly:

"I am not Buck Taylor, girl, but Tiger Tom.

"If you resist, or cry out, I shall hurt you.

"Remain quiet, and I will do you no harm."

It was Belle Hassan, and she was completely taken by surprise.

But her presence of mind did not desert her for an instant, and she said:

"I have no desire to bring indignities upon myself, so submit gracefully, for I know that Tiger Tom can be as merciless as the beast whose name he bears."

"Well said, girl: but let me compliment you upon your nerve."

"No need of it; but why have you made me a captive?"

"It is simply a question of money."

"Ransom?"

"Yes; but come, I will take that belt of arms you wear, and then we will start on the back trail."

"Whither?"

"Toward Mexico."

"It is a long ride."

"Yes, but we can reach the spot I would go to by dawn."

"And my father and his cowboys will be along soon after."

"Oh, no, for even Rio Grande Rob cannot follow a trail by night over this plain."

Belle knew that this was only too true, but she responded:

"Well, Buck Taylor and his Cowboy Clan are ahead and will be hot on your trail."

"How was it he failed to kill you that time, Tiger Tom, you fought the lasso duel with him?"

"The devil takes care of his own, I suppose," was the gruff response, and the chief urged the two horses into a canter.

"Well, somehow I believe that Buck Taylor will yet kill you, Tiger Tom."

"It's a game two can play at."

"Oh, yes, and one must fall," was the response of the brave girl.

CHAPTER L.

TIGER TOM'S CAPTIVE.

FOR some time the chief and his captive rode on in silence, and the glimmer of the light in Soldier's Retreat Ranch faded from view in the distance.

At last Belle asked in her cool way:

"Do you know who I am?"

"Belle Hassan, the daughter of Captain Ned Hassan of Soldier's Retreat."

The young girl burst forth in laughter, and the man said rudely:

"Does that giggle mean that you are not?"

"Take it as you please."

"Of course you are the girl I seek, for no other lives there, and I heard what you said about waiting at the cowboy camp for your father."

"You are Ned Hassan's girl, and I'll make him hand over a cool ten thousand in hard cash before I give you back to him!"

"Maybe he don't think I am worth it."

"If you talk like that I'll strike him for twenty thousand to show he will pay it."

"If he can raise such a large sum."

"Oh, yes, he can, for he's a very rich man."

"Now, girl, I want you to promise to keep quiet, and I'll not gag and tie you."

"I'll promise."

"We have got to ride hard, and I'll only halt twice through the night for a short rest and supper."

"I shall take you to where you will be in safe keeping, for I will leave you with my wife, and I'll cover up our tracks so no one will know you are there."

"I'll then send word to your father that I have you in my power, and when he sends

ten thousand dollars to a certain point, I will have a messenger there with you.

"Now you are a brave little woman, and the better you behave the better you will be treated.

"What do you say?"

"I will not do anything to anger a Tiger, so you may rely upon my good behavior."

"Now, don't talk to me any more."

For more than an hour they rode on in silence, keeping up the same steady canter.

After a ride of over fifteen miles from Soldier's Retreat, the Tiger of Texas halted at a spring which he appeared to know well, and which was well-sheltered by a clump of timber.

Belle sprung to the ground, and throwing his *serape* down near, he bade her rest while he got supper for them.

She did as he told her, while he unsaddled both horses and staked them out to feed.

Then he built a fire, with seemingly no fear of consequences, and put on a pot of coffee and some venison.

His haversack was well supplied, and Belle was glad to see that she would not have to go hungry.

She really enjoyed her supper when he placed it before her, and he also ate with the greatest relish.

He remained in camp for an hour, then he saddled the horses and pressed on once more at the same rapid pace.

At midnight another halt of one hour was made, and Belle drank a cup of coffee, and it did her good.

It was just at dawn that the chief halted in a range of hills, and some five miles distant from the old Mission Ranch.

"It will be a long, rapid walk for you, girl; but if you get too tired I will carry you," he said.

"Where are you going?"

"Yonder, to my ranch."

"Why not ride?"

"Because my trail will be followed, so I will leave the horses here, walk to the ranch and back, and then go on myself, leading your horse directly for the nearest ford of the Rio Grande.

"That will prove that I carried you into Mexico, you see."

"What a consummate villain you are, Tiger Tom."

"Thank you; but are you ready?"

"Oh yes, any time," was the plucky answer.

He led the way down the range and she followed, keeping up well and declining his proffered aid.

In little over an hour they walked the distance, and the chief went up to the ranch with his captive, to learn with surprise that his wife was away from home.

"Where is she, Liza?" he asked the negress.

"Don't know adzactly, sah."

"Well tell her I have this lady a prisoner here for her to take charge of."

"Yas, sah."

"You are to see that she does not escape, for if she does, when I am dead I'll haunt you day and night."

"Lordy, massa! I hain't going to let her git away if you talks dat kind o' talk."

"See that you do not."

"When I need you, Miss Hassan, to restore to your father, I will come myself or send for you."

"If you attempt to escape, this woman will kill you, and then let me tell you that there are men here on the ranch who could easily run you down, did you even succeed in getting away."

"Now good-by."

Belle bowed coldly, and after getting some provisions from the negress the chief went on his way, leaving poor Belle a captive in the old Mission Ranch, for to escap from Liza's charge, after the threat of the man, she knew would be impossible.

Returning to his camp, the chief found the horses well rested in the three hours they had had, and after building a fire, simply to mark a camping place for whoever should trail him, he pressed on leading Belle's horse toward the river, now compelled to travel by day.

He reached the river before night, crossed it, went up to another ford, and before dawn was once more in his retreat in the Canyon of Caverns, the two animals well fagged out.

CHAPTER LI.

A DOUBLE SURPRISE.

OLD LIZA was very careful not to give Belle Hassan the slightest chance to escape, as she stood in holy terror of being haunted.

The fact that Tiger Tom had been, as all supposed, killed, and certainly buried, was enough to cause her to feel a great terror for him, and she was afraid of his very presence.

That he should now say that he would haunt her after death, if she allowed the prisoner to get away, was more than enough to prevent her doing so.

Had Belle offered the negress the ten thousand dollars the Tiger of Texas hoped to get as her ransom from her father, to let her go free, the negress would have refused the terms.

This much did Belle see, and she quietly accepted the situation.

She was an utterly fearless girl, and she saw that that she was in no danger if she was in the home of Tiger Tom's wife.

She knew from her father and Monte Joe that Tiger Tom had caused his wife the deepest sorrow as well as chagrin at having never allowed her to know that he was living, and perhaps this might work to her, Belle's, welfare.

The home was certainly as comfortable a one as was the Soldier's Retreat, and this was saying a good deal.

There was a grand view from there, and she enjoyed the change in spite of being a captive.

She was allowed to come out of her room, when Liza got her breakfast ready for her, and a most inviting meal it was she was compelled to admit.

Then the negress gave her a view of the surroundings, at her request, and led her back to her room, while she looked after household duties.

Belle had the strongest desire, also, to see this remarkable woman, the Tigress of Texas, about whose beauty her father, Monte Joe and Buck Taylor had raved so.

Perhaps, too, by being upon the spot, in the lair of the Tigers, she could pick up useful information for future use.

She had not the remotest idea that her father should pay the large ransom demanded of her, for she intended to make her escape.

Just how she did not know, but she was a girl of remarkable expedients and she would yet be successful, she knew.

What distressed her most was the fact of the anxiety and sorrow her father and mother must feel about her absence.

She had ridden over as was her wont, to the cowboy camp, to meet her father, who was away with his men looking over a new herd of cattle he had purchased at another ranch.

He had said that he would return about dark, and by way of the cowboy camp.

But she had waited until an hour after, and then starting home, had seen the large form of the horseman ahead, and in the uncertain light had supposed it was the tall figure of Buck Taylor.

But grievous had been her mistake, and the fact that the Tiger of Texas had come to her home to kidnap her, showed how desperately in earnest he was.

Then, after being but a short while at the ranch of the Tiger of Texas, Liza called out to her:

"Missy Val'rie are coming."

The arrival of the "Tigress" has been seen, and Belle, who had been asleep, for she was well tired out after her long and hard night's ride, arose to see the woman about whom she had heard so much, and she could not but admit, stood in some dread of.

The splendid physique of the Tiger of Texas, his wonderfully handsome face, gentle voice and courtly manners at times, had attracted her deepest attention, when day dawned so that she could see him.

That he could also be the fiend, she well knew, and occasionally he had been sullen and rude with her, calling her "girl."

Still she was glad to have seen this man of mystery.

And now she was to see his equally remarkable wife.

She heard her arrival and Liza's greeting, and caught a glimpse of her through the window.

Then the quick step of the woman was

heard without, the door opened and the "Tigress" was before her.

And such a face as the eyes of Belle Hassan fell upon!

Such a form, too!

Flushed with anger, to know that Tiger Tom had again been there, after her threat to kill him if he came, and with her eyes full of a dangerous light at the thought of his having brought with him a captive, that captive a young girl, she entered the room to see who and what was the one who she believed had won her husband from her.

If Belle was startled in her admiration of the splendid-looking creature who appeared before her, Valerie Tracey was as much so at the beautiful girl upon whom her angry eyes fell.

One glance into the spirited, fearless, lovely yet perfectly innocent face, and her whole manner changed, and stepping forward, she said in the softest of voices:

"My poor child, and he has dared to bring you here?"

CHAPTER LII.

THE PROMISE.

BELLE HASSAN was prepared for defiance, to meet her enemy fearlessly, and when she saw her, at the first glance, mingled with her admiration was a determination that she would show as much courage as the occasion demanded.

But the sudden change in the woman's look and manner almost took her aback.

She was wholly unprepared for the tender look of sympathy that came into the splendid eyes, the sympathetic tone in the rich voice.

The truth was that Valerie Tracey had expected to see some handsome Mexican woman who had, knowingly, won her husband from her, and had dared come with him to her home.

Instead she saw a young girl, an American, beautiful it was true, yet possessing a beauty that was innocent in its loveliness.

A woman, yes, yet a child-woman, one to love, yet one to suspect no guile of, to feel only respect for.

Then it was she broke down from her angry manner, for she saw that the girl was really a captive, an unwilling one, of her cruel husband.

What she said brought tears to the eyes of Belle, so sudden and unexpected was the revolution from anger to gentleness and sympathy.

"I am here, madam, as your husband's most unwilling captive, for he kidnapped me from my home last night," and her voice seemed to strike a tender chord in the woman's heart as had her face.

"You were kidnapped last night from your home, poor child?"

"Yes, Mrs. Tracey."

"Where is your home?"

"Soldier's Retreat Ranch, which you may have heard of."

"What! are you the daughter of Captain Edward Hassan, whom I have met on several occasions?"

"Yes, Mrs. Tracey, I am Captain Hassan's daughter."

"Belle, I believe is your name?" said the woman, thoughtfully.

"Yes."

"How often have you ever met my husband?"

"Last night, after dark, for the first time, Mrs. Tracey."

"I had ridden over to the cowboy camp to meet my father, and something delaying him I did not start home until after night-fall."

"I saw some one ride into the trail ahead of me, coming from the west, and seeing that it was a man of very large stature, I supposed it was Buck Taylor, so rode after him, calling to him."

"My horse was at once lassoed and I found myself a prisoner of the man known as Tiger Tom."

"He disarmed me, and at once set off with me for this ranch."

"We rode all night, with two halts, and though he was not unkind to me, yet I felt that I was in very dangerous hands, and then too could not but grieve that my parents should be made to suffer so upon my account."

"Poor child, and why should he feel revenge toward you?"

"Perhaps he feels revenge against my father, madam, who is his sworn enemy, and also, he said that he intended getting a ransom of ten thousand dollars for my return in safety to my home."

"You see I am valuable, as my father is known to be rich?" and Belle smiled.

"Yes, and you go back to him without one dollar of ransom, and I am only happy that Tiger Tom brought you here, my poor child."

"I loved that man once, my child, as I could never love again."

"I submitted to all his vagaries, his crimes even, and—yes, perhaps aided him by my encouragement in things I should have condemned."

"Then he played me false, allowed another to rescue him from the grave, trusted to another to see him buried and taken from his loathsome resting-place, and not to me."

"He pretended to be his spirit walking the earth, not himself in flesh and blood, and so had me weeping over his empty grave."

"Now he has tried to come back to me, when he is aware that I know all, and, his band defeated, he is a fugitive, so seeks my aid, yet in vain, for now I despise where I admired, hate where I once loved."

"Why, I do not know, should my feelings have so changed, but certain it is that when he came to me a short while since, I began then and there to abhor him."

"Now, my dear little friend, I will not fret you with my sorrows, but let you feel that you are safe, and I will myself take you back to your father, restore you to your home without allowing one dollar of ransom to be paid."

"Trust me and be happy until we can depart together, for I was intending to make a visit to Trail Crossing for supplies, and for other reasons I need not explain, and it is not very far out of my way to go by your home."

"Now you need rest, so lie down and have a good sleep, and I will come to you after awhile."

The woman bent and kissed Belle's forehead, and turned quickly away; but she heard the earnest words:

"You are so noble, so good to me."

CHAPTER LIII.

OTHER VISITORS TO THE RANCH.

THE coming of Captain King and his troop to Old Mission Ranch, is known to the reader, and the cool nerve shown by the Tigress in entertaining the soldiers, when she then had hidden away on the place a score of the very men they were searching for.

As the sentinel had been killed in their escape, she well knew that summary justice would be dealt out to them should it be the cowboys that came to the ranch instead of the soldiers, should they discover them there.

And should the discovery be made by Captain King, she was well aware that she would stand convicted as their ally, perhaps their leader in the absence of the chief, while also, having gone to the post to see them, she would be looked upon with suspicion as having aided and abetted their escape, and be held guilty with the others.

With all this in her mind the woman had shown wonderful nerve in entertaining her guests, the soldiers.

When they were gone she went in to visit the captive.

"I did not wish them to see you, for I feared it would compromise me, and I am under a cloud now as Tiger Tom's wife."

"To-morrow we will start for your home, and all I ask of you is not to say that you have seen those fugitives come here."

"It was in your power to betray me, for you saw the men come, I know, and heard all that Captain King said, and yet you remained quiet."

"You could have come out and at once had their protection, at once been free."

"But I trusted you, and you did not betray me, and I thank you."

"Those men, fugitives from justice as they are now, came here as it was their chief's home, and they had no other place to go."

"They have done me no harm, and so I sheltered them from their pursuers."

"They can not remain here always, they must take care of themselves when they leave; but I have use for them first, and when you know just what it is some day, you will perhaps not censure me."

"Now, promise you will not say that I harbored those men."

"I promise, willingly, after the trust you have placed in me," was Belle's ready answer.

Later in the day the cowboy on watch came and reported that the soldiers were returning.

Quickly the fugitives ran back to their hiding-place, an underground room of the old Mission Chapel, and Mrs. Tracey took her glass and turned it upon the coming body of horsemen, while she muttered:

"What can they be coming back here for, I wonder?"

But the moment her glass was turned upon them she cried:

"Those are not soldiers!"

"What are they, Lady Captain?" asked Yankee Zeke, who, with Jew Jim stood by her side, for these two worthies had not yet retreated to their hiding-place in the underground ruin.

"They are Buck Taylor's Cowboys," was the response.

Both men uttered a cry of alarm, and as one person went flying away toward the hiding-place.

"Go, you cowards," said the woman with a sneer, and then as she saw that their flight had developed into a foot-race, and the "devil take the hindmost," she burst out into merry laughter at their terror.

The men quickly disappeared over the ridge, going to their retreat, and Mrs. Tracey again turned her glass upon the Cowboy Clan.

They had met the command of Captain King, and were returning to the post with proof that all that Yankee Zeke had written for them as a guide was a perfect fraud.

Naturally they were incensed against the traitor, and were only anxious to get their grip upon him.

Then they heard of the escape of the prisoners from Captain King, and just how far he had tracked them.

"If I had returned and reported to the colonel that I had no proof against them, that the man Yankee Zeke had cleverly gained his freedom and swindled us, Colonel Forsythe would have set them free, as he expected to do."

"But they have made their escape, and in doing so have killed a soldier, and this shows their desperation, and that they felt we had cause for hanging them, so now I shall stick to their trail until there is not one of the Tigers of Texas left to tell the tale," said Buck Taylor, seriously.

"But will you return to the post now, Buck?" asked Captain King.

"Oh, no, sir, I am away to stay now, for I am on a man-hunt, and I will go at once to pay a call to the Tigress of Texas."

"I just left there, as I told you."

"Yes, sir, but I will take a look at the surroundings, too, for somehow I can not get out of my mind that Mrs. Tracey holds as much power over the League as does Tiger Tom, though I do believe that he did deceive her about his death."

"I shall camp there to-night, sir."

And with this Buck Taylor rode on his way, followed by his Cowboy Clan, and their trail led directly toward the Tigers' Lair.

CHAPTER LIV.

TRUST.

The Cowboy Clan came on slowly toward the old Mission Ranch, and the Cattle Queen stood regarding their approach with the utmost coolness, though it was very evident that she felt worried.

There was much more danger in a visit of the Lasso Kings to the ranch than in one from the soldiers.

She could not readily deceive Buck Taylor she knew full well.

Then she knew that his men were expert trailers and might find some sign of the presence of an enemy about.

She recognized the tall form of the Cowboy

Captain in the lead, and then returned to the piazza, for she had gone out to the stockade lookout to get a better view with her glass.

Belle Hassan was upon the piazza, and said:

"I believe those are the Lasso Kings coming across the prairie, Mrs. Tracey."

"It is just who they are, Miss Hassan, and at their head rides their chief."

"Buck Taylor?"

"Yes."

"Then he will gladly take me home, and save you the trouble," said Belle, eagerly.

"I wish to take you home myself, Miss Hassan, and to prove thereby that I did not uphold my husband in his cruel capture of you.

"Should you go with the soldiers, or the Cowboy Clan, then it looks as though you had been rescued, that I had not willingly given you up."

"Will you trust me to carry out my plan to restore you to your home?"

"I will gladly do so, only as Buck Taylor was coming, I thought it would save you much trouble for me to go with him."

"You see that I would rather have you go with me?"

"Yes, and I will."

"I thank you."

"But I can see Mr. Taylor, I suppose?"

"If you do it reveals to him that you are here, and should I not keep my word to you, that he will know where to find you."

"No, I wish to take you home without any outside pressure to have me do so."

"I believe I understand you."

"And you will again go into hiding as when the soldiers were here?"

Belle Hassan looked squarely into the eyes of the woman.

She knew that she was taking big chances against rescue, should the woman play her false.

She had thrown away one chance, and should she now give up this one to escape?

Young as she was she was a splendid reader of human nature.

She looked through one's eyes into the soul, the heart, to read the motif, it seemed.

She was a hard student of the countenances of her fellow men and women, and now she acted upon her own reading of the woman's motive and said firmly:

"Mrs. Tracey, I will trust you wholly, as you wish me to do."

Again the woman's face lighted up, and she imprinted a kiss upon the bronzed but rosy-hued cheek of her captive.

"I appreciate the trust you have in me, Miss Hassan," she said, in a low tone, as though touched by it deeply.

And so Belle retired to her room, the woman following her and saying:

"Should you hear that it is the intention of the Cowboy Chief to search the cabin, Miss Hassan, I will let you know a secret."

"Yes."

"Do you see this chimney?"

"Yes."

"Well, see!"

As she spoke she exerted some little strength and one side of the chimney-piece rolled outward, revealing a small closet, amply large enough for one person to sit down in.

"You can open this, step in there, draw it to, and even Buck Taylor would never suspect your presence here."

"I will hide then if you signal to me that the house is to be searched, Mrs. Tracey."

"Then my signal shall be a burst of laughter."

"See, you understand how to open this secret closet—stand here and push hard."

"I will try it."

Belle did so and opened the secret closet readily.

"Now I will place my hat and whip in here, for Buck knows them, I guess."

"You are indeed kind, for I had not thought of that, and they might have betrayed your presence here, for Buck Taylor is no ordinary man."

"No, he is a natural scout and a detective as well; in fact I think all scouts make good detectives," Belle remarked.

"I believe you are right, and let me tell you that there is one man I really stand in dread of."

"Buck Taylor?"

"Yes, in a manner, though I could deceive him I think where I could not the other."

"And who is that other?"

"Monte Joe."

"Ah!" and Belle Hassan's face flushed.

"Yes, I fear that man."

"He is so perfectly calm under all circumstances, he seems to look straight into one's soul, and then he does not feel the sensation of fear I am sure."

"He may be a gambler, is in fact, but I feel sure that he is more than that—he is a man for wicked people to dread; but now I must go and greet my cowboy guests," and the woman left the room while Belle Hassan muttered:

"She reads Monte Joe just as I have."

CHAPTER LV.

THE COWBOY GUESTS.

WHEN the Cattle Queen returned to the piazza she saw that the cowboys were near the foot of the hill trail leading up to the ranch.

She quickly called Liza, and also the man whose duty it was to stay about the place, and gave them some instructions.

Then she made a quick visit to the lair of the hiding men.

It was an unpleasant retreat at best, and the men were crowded there, but not one of them uttered a complaint when she called down through a crevice in the stones:

"Not a word must be uttered, even in a whisper, until I come to assure you all is right."

"No one must smoke, for it will be noticed by those keen-nosed Texans."

"Do not let any man drop to sleep who may snore, for these men intend to make a close search, I am sure."

"They are now coming up the hill trail."

A silence like death followed her words, and then she hastened back to the piazza, and was quickly seated in her easy-chair, a book in her hand, when Buck Taylor rode forward and dismounted.

His men halted some distance away, and he, doffing his broad sombrero, walked toward the piazza.

"Captain Taylor, I again welcome you to my home."

"Had you arrived several hours sooner, you would have found here Captain King and his troop."

"Indeed?"

"And which way did he go upon leaving?" asked Buck Taylor, determined not to admit having seen the troopers.

"He returned to Round-top Post, I believe."

"But, be seated, and have your men go into camp for the night, for I shall be most happy to entertain you all."

"You are most kind, Mrs. Tracey, and I shall accept your kind invitation, though my men have plenty of provisions and can camp yonder in the pines."

"I will not consent to that, for there are quarters here we call the barracks, and my servant can cook for them, while you must be my guest here."

Buck Taylor bowed and consented.

He hated to impose himself and his men upon one's hospitality which he was seemingly betraying, for every man was to be on the alert all night for anything they could discover.

But he wanted to satisfy himself fully that Mrs. Tracey was not in the League of the Tigers of Texas.

He had noted a fact, from what Captain King had told him, and which the soldiers had failed to take notice of.

This was that it was a remarkable thing that every horse had failed in the ride of the fugitives for Mexico.

There was not an exception among the animals, for all of them had been picked up by the troopers.

Why had this been? he wondered.

The more he thought it over, the more he came to the conclusion that the men had rushed their horses hard, then deserted them and made their way on foot to cover up their trails.

He had had a talk with Captain King's two scouts, and he now felt assured that the fugitives had not gone to Mexico.

Although scattered, they had all seemed to aim for one ford on the Rio Grande.

That ford was the one nearest the old Mission Ranch.

With these facts before him, Buck Taylor went to the ranch of the Tigress with the firm conviction that the men had made their way there or were doing so.

He had found Yankee Zeke a doubly-distilled fraud, and Captain King had told him of Jew Jim's clever work of rescue.

When the Cattle Queen had been so pressing in her wish for him to remain, he was not so sure that it was not assumed hospitality.

But he took her at her word, and so said:

"Well, Mrs. Tracey, I will accept your kind invitation, and some of my men who have colds, will be glad to sleep in the barracks, but the others will camp in the pines yonder."

"As you please, Captain Taylor," was the answer.

Buck then went to place his men.

He had pleaded "colds" so as to divide his men.

He wished some of them among the quarters away from the house, and the others in the pines.

He would place a sentinel over his horses, and another at the trail leading down to the prairie.

He would thus have, with himself in the cabin as a guest, five points guarded, so to speak, and if there was an arrival at the ranch, or a departure, it would be known.

Mrs. Tracey seemed not in the least disconcerted, though she could not but think of the score of men crowded in the dungeon retreat under the ruins.

The cowboys learning that they were to camp for the night, at once saw to the comfort of their horses and then dispersed about the place as though in admiration of such a complete home; but the eyes and ears of all of them were open for what they could see and hear.

CHAPTER LVI.

A WOMAN AGAINST THEM.

THE Cattle Queen's sympathy was for the men in the dungeon, while of course she felt a dread of discovery on her own account as well.

"They deserve a fright for the killing of that soldier," she said to herself, as she went about aiding Liza prepare supper for the numerous guests.

A room had been assigned to Buck Taylor for the night, and then Mrs. Tracey took a peep in at Belle.

"I am sorry, my dear, that you will be like a prisoner, for they intend to remain all night."

"Yes, I overheard what was said; but I will be on the watch in case Buck Taylor should attempt a search suddenly in the night, for there is no telling just what he will do, and I feel sure that he is here on suspicion of wrong."

"I know him well, and he met Captain King, heard what he had to say, and then came himself."

"But the men?"

"Are huddled in the dungeon."

"Will they not betray themselves in some way?"

"If they do it is their own fault, for they have been warned."

"Liza was not in time to get them food and water, and they will have a time of horror, without doubt; but they will know that it is sure death to be discovered."

"Now I must leave you," and the woman hastened away.

Belle locked the door after her and sat down to think.

She had drawn the curtain close, so that no one could see in, and she was really helping on her own imprisonment.

There, within call of her were two-score gallant Texans, one whom she regarded as dearly as a brother, and yet she had promised not to let her presence there be known, and she would keep her word.

The darkness fell, and yet she remained there in deep thought.

Her thoughts were of home, and the sorrow they must feel there at her mysterious disappearance.

She wondered just what her father had

done to attempt her rescue, and why they had not come to the old Mission Ranch, for surely the trail led near it, and there were plenty of cowboys there to follow it.

But then she recalled how the chief had come on foot, while after leaving her at the ranch he had returned to his horses and gone on to Mexico.

"Yes, they will follow the trail of the horses to the Rio Grande, and believe that I have been taken into Mexico."

"But, should they come here?"

This thought struck her suddenly, and she started.

"Why would I have to keep in hiding from my own father, to let him still sorrow, still hunt for me, just to keep my word to this woman?"

She was evidently troubled by the thought and in a quandary as to what she should do for a long while.

At last she said:

"Well, I will wait to see if father does track me here, and then I will discover if she will ask me still to conceal myself."

"Should she do so, I almost fear I would grow suspicious of her."

Belle heard in the kitchen the laughter of the cowboys, and their praises of old Lize's elegant supper.

She also heard Mrs. Tracy and Buck return to the piazza, and then her offer to sing for his men if they wished her to do so.

They were only too glad to have her do so, and they gathered about the piazza in groups, while they smoked their pipes at a respectful distance from the beautiful woman who was such a mystery to them. She ran her slender fingers across the strings of the guitar, and then sung a pathetic little ballad which touched the hearts of the brave, strong men.

Next she sang the "Texan Cowboy's" song, and it was received with a cheer of delight, while a number of manly voices joined in the chorus.

*Lie down now cattle, don't heed any rattle,
But quietly rest until morn,
For if you skedadle, we'll jump into the saddle
And head you off, sure as you're born."*

For over an hour, the Cattle Queen sung to the cowboys, and when at last they felt that they should tire her no longer, they gave her three cheers and started for their camping places for the night.

The fugitives in the dungeon had heard the singing, laughter and cheers, and not daring to whisper even, they had mentally cursed the whole Cowboy Clan.

"I will have a look at my boys," said Buck Taylor, and he went first to his camp in the pines, and asked:

"Any discoveries, boys?"

"Nothing, cap'n, all quiet, and I guesses we are on a blind trail," said one, and it was the opinion of all.

Then he went to the barracks, and there too he got about the same answer.

The four cowboys of the ranch had brought in their cattle, had their supper, and though seemingly shy of the Lasso Kings, were yet most cordial to them.

The sentinels were posted then, and a guard set to relieve them during the night.

Then Buck Taylor returned to the cabin and retired to his room, the door of which was open and a lamp burning upon the table.

But he did not see the Cattle Queen.

The night passed off quietly, the cowboys had an early breakfast, and later the Cattle Queen and Buck Taylor breakfasted together.

Then he thanked her for her hospitality, and with his men mounted and rode away, while from his lips fell the words:

"I wish I was satisfied, boys; but I am not, for I still doubt that woman."

CHAPTER LVII.

A SECRET WAY.

BUCK TAYLOR had intimated to the Cattle Queen that he should return to the fort.

He had not been trapped into admitting that he knew aught of her visit to the fort, or of the escape of the prisoners, which he had learned from Captain King.

And yet, guarded as he was the woman had cleverly entrapped several of his men,

with whom she had conversed, and discovered that they had met Captain King and knew all that had occurred at the fort.

Instinctively too she saw that Buck Taylor still doubted her, and when he implied that he was going to the fort she felt sure that he was not.

"No, he intends to put a chain of scouts around the ranch, close in at night, and far enough off to be out of sight from here by day."

"Well, I have no time to lose."

With this she sought Belle Hassan and told her just what she expected Buck Taylor would do.

"Now we must get away before we are caught in the circle."

"The men I shall leave here, and they must keep hidden, or their discovery be upon their own heads."

"Bolton shall accompany us, for he is a good cook, a brave fellow, and knows the country well."

"I shall take a pack-horse with all we need, and fortunately I have another saddle for you to ride."

"The horses we will take have no superiors in speed in Texas, so we will be safe should we run upon a band of Indians."

"Now while I see my men you get ready, please, and we will be away in half an hour."

Belle was only too glad to obey, and began to prepare for her trip, while the Cattle Queen went to the dungeon and called to the men to come out.

They were nearly suffocated with the vitiated air, and starving for food and water.

"Men, thus far you have saved your necks; but though your foes are disappearing yonder over the prairies, they intend to completely encircle this ranch before night."

"You are to remain close to this place by day, and at night retreat to this dungeon, for they may make a dash in upon you at any time, so if you value your lives obey."

"Two of the herders will keep watch, but do not become reckless on that account."

"I am going away for a few days, but will be back with news that I hope will show that your foes have given up the hunt for you."

"Be warned by what I say though, not to expose your lives to the sight of a glass turned here from the hills."

"When I have gone, Liza will give you all your breakfasts, and look to your comfort."

With this the Cattle Queen turned away and in just half an hour after, she and Belle mounted and rode away from the cabin.

They were followed by Bolton leading a well-laden pack-horse.

The Cattle Queen led the way, not by the trail the cowboys and soldiers had come and gone, but down through the corral to the ledge running like a huge back-ground from the rear of the hill to the range some distance off.

She knew a secret way through the ridge of reaching the prairies, and said:

"You see, Miss Hassan, I am letting you into the secrets of my stronghold."

"You may do so with safety, Mrs. Tracey, as I never betray a confidence," was the answer.

They soon reached the prairie, and at once the Cattle Queen set off at a gallop, saying:

"Ride in Indian file here."

For a couple of miles she kept up her pace, and then Belle saw one of the herders driving a number of horses around the side of the hill and following their trail.

"I do not intend to have our trail leaving the ranch discovered and followed," explained the Cattle Queen.

The drove of horses followed to a creek, and then were turned back, for the fair guide had followed the bed of the stream down its course, thus washing out all tracks.

She stuck to the stream for several miles, and then turned out upon the prairie.

"Now we are all right," she said.

"But why were you anxious to hide your tracks?"

"I did not wish Buck Taylor to discover that a party of four had left the ranch, for one reason, and for another I did not care to be pursued."

"Had he overtaken us, then I would not have had the credit of taking you home, but

instead it would have been thought I was taking you to some secret hiding-place."

"Then you do not believe the Cowboy Clan has returned to the fort?"

"No more than we have."

"But why?"

"Because Buck Taylor does not trust me."

"That I can read plainly, though I did not allow him to see that I doubted him."

"He took the trail for the fort, and once out of sight he will throw his fifty men entirely around the ranch, a long distance off by day, and drawing them in by night."

"But we are through the line, and tomorrow you will be safe at home, my child."

"And it will be because you have proven my friend, when I believed you my foe."

"Well, a few weeks ago I had wicked thoughts as to my future, but I have changed my plans now, and it was seeing you that caused me to do so."

"I am a different woman now," and Belle saw tears come into the beautiful eyes of the Tigress of Texas, and pitied her.

CHAPTER LVIII.

MONTE JOE'S DREAM.

MONTE JOE had played late and had won steadily through the night.

He had done several good deeds too, for he had helped some poor emigrants and had sent some groceries to one or two men in need.

He had also given back the money won from a poor man, whom he had supposed to be well off, and saved another's life.

All these good deeds had been the work of an afternoon and the night following, up to two o'clock A. M.

With a cool thousand in his pockets, his winnings, he had gone to the hotel and retired to his room.

He enjoyed a cigar, and a good one, for when he smoked it was the very best he could find.

Then in a fairly good humor with himself and the world in general, he went to bed.

His conscience did not give him any twinges out of the usual run, and he sunk to sleep as peacefully as a babe under the influence of the paregoric the nurses stuff them with when they wish to entertain their beaux.

How long he had been asleep he did not know; but he was awakened by hearing his name spoken most distinctly, and then came several shots.

He sprung from the bed, dressed rapidly and yet all was quiet.

No one had heard any sound, and convinced that it was but a dream he returned to his room and in a few moments he was asleep again.

Once more he heard shots, his name called distinctly, and this time he recognized the voice.

"My God! it was *her* voice!" he cried as he again sprung from the bed.

He again went down-stairs, and no one had heard a sound except himself.

He returned to his room, dressed himself for the trail, and went out to the stable and ordered his horse.

His word was law in that house and so the steward got up and gave him provisions to take with him.

Thus, an hour after his awakening, he was mounted upon his best horse, armed to the teeth, and riding in the early gray of morning along the trail toward Soldier's Retreat.

He could not shake off the dread that weighed upon his heart, that there was something wrong at the Hassan Ranch.

It was a long ride to find out, but he would go and see.

And so he was upon his way there, and all the while his thoughts were upon Belle Hassan, for it had been her voice that had called his name, her face he had seen in his dream.

He did not ride slowly, either, but urged his horse along like one going to a rescue.

His horse was one that could stand a long trail, and Monte Joe had a standing offer of a thousand dollars to give for any animal that could equal him in speed, but thus far though many had been brought to test their running powers with the gambler's black, not one had ever been within an eighth of a mile of him when he dashed across the winning line.

Until the sun was well above the horizon Monte Joe rode on, and then found a place for rest, food and water.

His horse was looked to first, and then a cup of coffee was made and some cold meat and bread eaten.

Just one hour did the gambler halt, and then mounting again he set off at the same pace as before.

For three hours no halt was made, save to water his horse, and then came a camp of half an hour.

The saddle and bridle were taken off, and while the horse cropped grass the gambler rubbed him down hard.

Then came another canter of three hours, and a halt was made for dinner.

This time the horse was first rubbed down, then staked out, and the gambler next thought of himself.

His cold provisions from the hotel came in well, with another cup of coffee, and then he leant back against a tree, and slept for an hour, for he needed it.

This gave his horse a rest of an hour and a half, and when he again started the animal appeared as fresh as he had been when leaving Trail Crossing, in spite of the many miles he had cast behind him.

Just as the sun was setting he rode into a clump of timber, bordering a stream.

The land was hilly on his side, but beyond the prairie stretched for miles and miles, only broken here and there by timber mottes.

There was a ford there, and the timber was thicker and heavier than at any other point along the stream.

The trail crossing the ford divided after leaving the stream into three.

One trail turned abruptly off to the right, another held straight out across the prairie, and the third turned to the left, following down the stream.

The one to the right, running up the stream, was the trail leading to Soldier's Retreat Ranch, while the center one would take him near Old Mission Ranch.

The third was the direct trail to the Rio Grande.

He had halted his horse in the stream for water, when suddenly he heard a shot out upon the prairie, followed by wild yells of triumph

CHAPTER LIX.

RED FOES.

WHEN the Cattle Queen had gotten clear of the danger of being caught in the circle of the Cowboys' Clan, she breathed more freely, and drew their pace down to a slower gait than the one she had kept the horses up to since leaving the ranch.

They rode side by side, she and Belle, and Bolton followed a short distance in the rear with the pack-horse.

As they rode along they chatted pleasantly together, and Belle was fairly charmed with her companion's wit and conversational powers.

She seemed to have seen much of the world, beyond the confines of Texas, and certainly possessed a very superior education.

She told Belle stories of life in New Orleans, where had been her home, and then of foreign lands.

Growing confidential, and finding the young girl a good listener, the Cattle Queen told her of her girlhood, her early home and meeting with Tiger Tom.

She also told her of how he had saved her life, what a hero he had been in her eyes, and that her love for him had been so blind that she hardly saw his faults, and in fact it had become almost idolatry on her part. Of her reason for living on a desolate ranch in Texas, she made no comment, and Belle made no inquiry.

At length the shadows began to deepen, and Bolton spoke of a secure and good camping place not far away.

They rode thither and found it a small canyon, where the grass grew like velvet, and a stream, clear as crystal, was found.

Bolton at once built a fire in a ravine among the rocks, so that the blaze could not be seen far off, and unsaddling the horses staked them out for the night.

Then the tent was pitched, a small "A"

tent, but amply large enough for the two females, and their *serapes* were spread by themselves.

The pack furnished cooking utensils and ample food, though the Cattle Queen had brought down a young deer a few miles back on the trail, and so they had some tender steaks to broil.

A more delicious cup of coffee Belle said that she had never enjoyed, and she certainly did relish the supper.

After eating his supper Bolton took a scout about the camp and when he returned reported no foe in view and all quiet.

The night passed away without molestation from any one, even the wolves remaining some distance off and howling their mournful chorus.

Before dawn, Bolton awoke, took another scout around the camp, then built a fire, and while it was kindling well, staked the horses out to feed in fresh piaces.

By the time he returned the Cattle Queen and Belle were out and breakfast was soon over with.

Just at sunrise they started, and as they pushed away across the prairies Belle Hassan pointed to a fresh trail and said:

"That has been made within the last hour or two."

"You are right, miss," Bolton said, as he halted and viewed the trail.

"And Indians made it."

"Right again, miss, and they struck the hills not far from where we left them."

"If they see us they'll give chase."

"With our horses we have no fear of a chase, Bolton," the Cattle Queen remarked.

"No, Lady Captain, only I'd rather not have them see us."

"Your wish is in vain, Bolton, for see there!" and Belle pointed back to the range now a couple of miles distant, to where were visible a score of horsemen.

They had gone to the range, had looked for a good place to cross and thus had come upon the fresh trail of the pale-faces, for these were Indians, as Belle had said.

Seeing that it led out upon the open prairie and was just made, they rode to the outer edge of the fringe of woods and beheld the party of three out on the plains.

Their keen eyes detected that there were two women, one man and a pack-horse, and it was just to their taste, this discovery.

Without giving vent to a cry of triumph, as they were anxious to creep as near as possible without discovery, upon their intended victims, they rode off at a gallop in chase.

They were all well mounted and their horses were fresh, among them, half a dozen American horses, the balance being Indian ponies, but good ones.

"There are just twenty-one of them, and they are Comanches," said Belle, quietly, she having counted them.

Seeing that they were discovered the Indians dashed forward in hot pursuit.

"Let us try their speed," said the Cattle Queen, and they set off in a rapid gallop.

"They are well mounted," she said, as she saw that they were gaining, and their speed was increased to a run, though not at their horses' fleetest pace.

"They doubtless know that we are heading for Soldier's Retreat Ranch, Lady Captain, for see, they are stretching out in a line so as to head us off at the bend of the trail yonder, and drive us straight ahead to where there are no soldiers or aid," and Bolton pointed to the line of the Comanches which was now extending to their left.

CHAPTER LX.

THE CHASE.

"WE have nothing to fear, with these horses under us," said the Cattle Queen, and she gave a quick glance at Belle Hassan.

That young lady was as cool as an icicle, though she responded:

"I do not like being headed off though, Mrs. Tracey, for we will be driven toward Trail Crossing and there are no ranches until we get nearly there."

"Yet we cannot turn on the trail to your home."

"Let us see what the speed of our horses will do for us, for we may be able to do so."

"We can but try," the Cattle Queen said.

"Put them to it for all they are worth,"

cried Bolton, and the four horses were urged to their utmost speed.

That the boast of the Cattle Queen of their fleetness had not been uncalled for, Belle soon realized, for they began to drop their pursuers rapidly, and it seemed would be able to reach the head of the ravine and turn into the Soldier's Retreat trail.

But suddenly they saw that some of the Indians began to press on more rapidly than their fellows, and Bolton called out:

"We could have done it but for those American horses, for half a dozen of the reds have large animals, you see, Lady Captain."

"You are right, Bolton."

"Don't press ours so hard now we see we can't make the turn, and it's to be a long chase," he urged.

So the horses were brought down to their former pace once more.

But the Comanches had tested the speed of the animals they were in pursuit of, and now, while one end of their line still obliqued to head them off from the trail to the Hassan Ranch, the six warriors mounted upon the large American horses were sent directly on in rapid chase.

These gained rapidly, led by the chief, and it was not long before the pursued had to increase their speed again.

"Put them down to it hard," cried Bolton, and the four horses stretched out in full flight and at their utmost speed.

They slowly began to creep away from four of their nearest pursuers, but two still held their own.

"Those two braves are as well mounted as we are, for, see, they are even gaining," said Belle.

A glance was enough to prove this, and Bolton said:

"Let them come on, for I do not care for but two, as they hardly have rifles."

In this, too, he soon found he was mistaken, for as the two Indians, now far ahead of the main force, and leading their four comrades a long distance, began to creep up steadily, one of them showed that he had a rifle.

It was the chief, and his horse, too, began to gain more rapidly than the animal of his companion.

"That pack-horse keeps us back, so let him go, Bolton," called out the Cattle Queen.

The man obeyed at once, and the horse, finding that he was no longer urged, dropped rapidly to the rear.

But the chief did not even give him a glance, but came more rapidly on, until at last he threw his rifle to his shoulder and fired.

It was unexpected, but showed good aim, for the bullet cut close to Bolton's head.

The latter instantly wheeled in his saddle, and returned the fire, and yet with no harm to the red-skin rider or his horse.

Still the chief gained, though slowly, and once more Bolton prepared to fire.

"Keep right on, for I shall halt for this shot," he called out.

But the Cattle Queen and Belle also drew rein.

Throwing himself from the saddle Bolton took steady aim, and with his shot the chief's horse went down, throwing him heavily.

A cheer broke from the lips of the Cattle Queen and Belle, while the man gave a wild shout of triumph.

Mounting once more they pressed on, but at a slackened speed.

They saw the next warrior come up and the chief mount his horse and continue the pursuit, but though this animal gained it was very slowly.

At last however he got within range of Bolton's rifle and he halted to fire.

The chief did the same and both rifles were discharged at the same instant.

Again was Bolton's aim sure, for the second horse went down, and the chief got another hard fall.

But the bullet from his rifle found a target in Bolton's horse, and it was seen that the animal was hit hard.

Mounting him however they rode on once more, but at a slower pace, for the horses of the other Indians who were better mounted than their fellows, were a mile away, or more.

The main force were fully two miles back on the prairie.

The chase had now continued for several hours, and the horses were drawn down to a walk to give them a rest, and as they crossed a stream soon after they were given a drink.

The chief again mounted one of his warriors' horses, and came on in pursuit; but the animal he bestrode could not keep ahead of the procession, so he had to be content with riding along with his three equally as well mounted braves.

Until the four men were getting within range of the deadly rifle of the chief, the fugitives did not press their horses out of a walk.

But then they urged them into a run again and noted at once that the rest and water had done them good, only Bolton's horse was growing weaker.

CHAPTER LXI.

ANOTHER SHOT.

Thus for hours the chase was kept up until the horses of the pursued and pursuers could hardly go faster than a walk, and the animal Bolton rode was fast failing.

The man had dismounted, and was walking by his side, and only when the red-skins made a rush for a short distance did he mount and press on to keep out of range of the chief's rifle.

Time and again he would fire, only to see that he was beyond range, and yet he hoped against hope that a stray bullet might hit a red-skin or his horse.

The mass of Indians in the rear began to creep up now.

Their tireless Indian ponies were beginning to show that the race was not to the swift, and that in the long run they would reach the goal first.

They crept up to the four American horses, and the persevering chief again dismounted and took the best pony of the lot.

Then he came on at the head of the body of warriors, and once more Bolton halted to fire.

As he did so his own horse staggered and fell,

"Poor, noble fellow, he has done all he could," said Belle, with tears in her eyes.

Then Bolton fired, and a warrior fell from his saddle.

"Come and mount behind me, for I am the lightest," said Belle.

"No, I will run between your horses," was the answer, and he did so.

But the chief once more spurred on ahead, halted and fired.

A groan and Bolton fell dead in his tracks, leaving the Tigress and Belle Hassan alone upon the prairie.

They dared not halt now, and with firm set lips rode on.

A wild yell came from the Comanches as they saw the man fall, and when they came up to his body, there were shouts of triumph that were enough to cause the stoutest hearts to quail.

Neither Belle or the Cattle Queen uttered a word for a long while, and then the latter said:

"Belle?"

"Yes, Mrs. Tracy."

"I feel that I have brought this upon you."

"How so, pray, for I cannot understand that you have."

"I could have let you depart with the soldiers, or the cowboys, and yet I did not."

"Now do not blame yourself, please, my dear Mrs. Tracey, for I assure you I feel not as you do about it."

"We cannot look into the future; you planned for the best, and somehow I feel that we are going to get out of this scrape yet, for we are armed you know, and if I only had my repeating rifle, which Tiger Tom took from me, I could stand off the whole lot, for its range is far beyond the weapon of the chief."

"And my rifle's range is not equal to his."

"But you can open if they come near, for they won't shoot to kill us, as we are to be taken alive."

"Our horses, yes, they may kill, but not us."

"They do not know you have a rifle, and the first one to drop will be the chief, for he is a good shot."

"Then we can entertain them with our revolvers, so you see the battle is by no means lost yet, my dear Mrs. Tracy."

"Belle Hassan, you are the bravest girl I ever saw, and you give me hope and courage."

"Yes, we are still ahead in the race, well-armed, and if they are gaining it is very slowly."

"When I fire, the chief is my target and I shall not miss him," and the spirits of the Cattle Queen again rose, though to her credit be it said she had felt for the young girl whom she had gotten into this terrible danger.

So on they pressed, and at last a long line of timber came into view.

"Mrs. Tracey."

"Yes, Belle."

"That timber borders a stream, and there is a ford there."

"This side, the trail turns to the right and leads to my home."

"If we cannot urge our horses faster, we can stand at bay in the timber."

"What do you say?"

"It is our only chance, that I can see—Ah!"

The chief had halted, raised his rifle and fired.

The horse ridden by the Cattle Queen uttered a loud snort, sprung forward and then half-fell.

"My God! His leg is broken," cried the Cattle Queen.

In an instant she had leaped to the ground, her eyes flashing fury, and raising her rifle she took quick aim and fired, amid the wild yells of the Comanches, who had felt sure of their game.

But their yells ceased with that shot, for their chief dropped from his saddle, a bullet in his brain.

Realizing their loss the Comanches yelled more savagely now and beat their ponies into a run.

"Come, spring up behind me!"

"My horse must carry us both to yonder woods!" cried Belle.

The Cattle Queen handed up her rifle to Belle, then leaped to a seat behind her, and the double-weighted horse was urged on.

He seemed to realize all that was expected of him, and for nearly a mile he held his own.

But then he began to drop back, and instantly Belle slipped from the saddle, gathered her skirt about her and said:

"I can run a long distance and thus relieve him."

"Then you can try it on foot while I rest."

This they did until each had made several mounts and dismounts, and each was growing very weary with the hard exertion.

But the timber was not far off now, and they were hoping to reach it, when there came a shot and their horse staggered, yet held bravely on.

"He cannot last long now," said Belle, and she leaped from the saddle, for she was riding at the time.

CHAPTER LXII.

MONTE JOE AS A DEFENDER.

The shot which Monte Joe heard, while his horse was in the stream was the one which had wounded the horse, the sole hope of the Cattle Queen and Belle Hassan.

They saw that the animal could not last long, but it was his life that must be sacrificed, so the Cattle Queen called out:

"Quick! spring up behind me, and we will make him help us to the last, and we can rest."

"It seems cruel," cried Belle, but she obeyed, and the wounded horse was urged on with the now howling red-skins in hot pursuit.

The animal did his best, but staggered badly within a hundred yards of the timber, and the two riders leaped from his back, gathered up their skirts and ran at full speed.

If they could reach the timber they might yet hold the red-skins at bay.

They did reach the timber, panting like hounds, and turned at bay, for the Indians were coming on, not two hundred yards away.

Neither Belle or the Cattle Queen could speak, but they uttered a slight cry as they suddenly heard the words:

"Allow me to take this fight off your hands, ladies."

Monte Joe was the speaker, and he rode into full view now and threw his repeating rifle to his shoulder.

One! two! three! four! the shots flashed out, steadily, but slowly, and each bullet found its human target.

Then the shots rattled out rapidly, and the rifle was emptied, slung at his back, and with a revolver in each hand the daring man charged out upon a foe that was overwhelming in numbers, to fight them single-handed.

And the wild, weird war-cry that came from his lips spread terror to the hearts of the red-skins.

Bolton had killed one of their number, two more had been dismounted by his killing their horses, and the chief had fallen under the deadly aim of the Cattle Queen.

Now a half a dozen more had dropped from their saddles, dead or wounded, under the fire of the man who showed such utter contempt for their numbers as to charge directly upon them.

They did just what Monte Joe expected they would, killed a number of their ponies, dragged them in a circle and sought shelter behind them, for certainly they must have other foes to fight.

Monte Joe planned quickly and well, for he charged directly toward two ponies whose riders had fallen; and that were coming toward him.

In an instant he had caught both, and dismounting reloaded his rifle, while the Indians were still seeking cover.

Once his rifle was reloaded Monte Joe opened fire again, uninformed it seemed of the short-range guns of his foes.

This time his aim was upon the group of ponies.

It seemed cruel, but one after the other went down until the last had fallen, and then the daring defender turned and rode back toward the timber, while he called out:

"The Comanches are all on foot now, so you have nothing to fear, for I can hold them at bay with my rifle."

The welcome that he received from Belle and the Cattle Queen was a flood of tears, so suddenly had the transformation come to them from despair to hope.

"This is our trail, so let me aid you to mount my horse, and you can lead those two ponies until they are rested, while I will bring up the rear."

They obeyed in silence, and then the gambler turned with the remark:

"Ah! they are discovering that I have no aid, so are getting revengeful."

"I must give them a hint not to crowd us."

"You ride on, please, for I can run like a deer and keep it up for miles."

"I am trained to it."

They obeyed without a word, and then saw him boldly advance toward the Comanches, who were now forming into a skirmish line.

Up to his shoulder went his rifle, and at its sharp report an Indian fell.

Again he fired, and though the red-skin did not fall he uttered a wild yell of rage and pain, and all rushed back to their shelter, the breastwork of dead ponies.

Monte Joe did not fire again, but hastened on after those whom he had so nobly rescued.

"Why did you not fire again, Monte Joe, for such a dead shot as you are could have picked off several more of those red fiends?" said the Cattle Queen.

"Well, Mrs. Tracey, it looked to me like a one-sided fight, for not a rifle they have would hardly more than reach me, and then I never take life wantonly."

"I am glad you have escaped them, and at first I wanted to massacre the whole outfit, but it was too easy to do."

"They will give us no further trouble, but make all haste back on the trail they came to reach their retreat in the hills before pursuit can overtake them."

"Now tell me how it is that I find you, Miss Hassan, just as I expected, in deadly danger?"

"You expected to find me in deadly danger?" asked Belle, with surprise.

"Yes, for though I am not superstitious, nor do I believe in dreams, yet I was awakened twice last night by your calling my name."

"I recognized your voice, seemed to see your face, and I at the second call mounted my horse and took the trail for your house."

"God bless you," said Belle in a low tone, while the Cattle Queen responded firmly:

"And to that prayer I say a fervent Amen!"

CHAPTER LXIII.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

WITH Monte Joe as their escort neither the Cattle Queen or Belle Hassan seemed to feel any fear, and when he suggested going into the camp after an hour's ride, as darkness had come on, they yielded without a word.

He was amply supplied with provisions, and he spread his blankets for them to sleep upon, under a wicki-up which he had quickly made of brush.

"Now I must keep watch, and I am rested, so sleep until I call you," he said.

They obeyed him and did sleep until the day dawned, so utterly worn out they were.

He had built a fire and was cooking breakfast, which was ready by the time they were, and then he made two padded saddles, with moss and his blankets, and strapped them on the backs of the Indian ponies with their stake-ropes.

Then he aided them to mount, and springing lightly into the saddle himself, led the way.

The ponies were pretty well rested, and were kept at a good pace, for Monte Joe was anxious to reach Soldier's Retreat and relieve the mind of Mrs. Hassan about her daughter, for that Captain Hassan was away on the search for her he felt assured.

They were discovered afar off by the fond mother, who was pacing up and down the piazza in an agony of suspense, as she had been since the disappearance of Belle.

The meeting between mother and daughter I will not dwell upon, for it was a most pathetic one.

And the Cattle Queen came in for her welcome too: but when Monte Joe said he would at once follow the trail of Captain Hassan and his clan of cowboys, who had gone off the day after Bell's capture upon the tracks of her horse and Tiger Tom's, she said she would accompany him, if she could get a horse.

In vain did Belle and Mrs. Hassan urge, she was determined, so Belle gave her the best horse she had, and a good saddle, and three hours after arriving at Soldier's Retreat she set out with Monte Joe on the trail.

The trail the reader knows led to within a few miles of old Mission Ranch, and there Tiger Tom had gone on foot with his captive.

This piece of information Belle had given Monte Joe, and he kept it to himself.

The next morning they drew near to the old Mission Ranch, and found one of the herdsmen, who rapidly came forward to meet them.

It was Dagger Don, and he had just returned the night before from the mission he had been sent upon by the Cattle Queen.

He greeted Monte Joe pleasantly, and said:

"I have to report, Lady Captain, that Tiger Tom and a number of his men got into the corral last night, and captured a lot of horses."

"They must have been the men who escaped from Round-top, and whom the men at the ranch said Buck Taylor and his cowboys were looking for."

"I came out here to count the number of horses taken, when I saw you coming, and rode forward to join you."

"These men were led by Tiger Tom?"

"Yes, Lady Captain," and the Cattle Queen saw that Dagger Don had more to tell, but did not wish to speak before Monte Joe.

"Well, we will go to the ranch; but it is useless to go after the horses."

"Buck Taylor and his clan started upon their trail two hours ago, Lady Captain, for the Lasso Kings were hiding in the range yonder watching the ranch for some reason."

"Then I will ask for a fresh horse, and a good one, Mrs. Tracey, and shall follow Taylor and his men," said Monte Joe.

"Certainly, if you wish it, Monte Joe," was the reply, and the three rode rapidly on to the ranch.

After a hasty lunch, and mounted upon a fine horse which Dagger Don had brought up for him, Monte Joe went off on the trail of the Cowboy Clan, who were following that of the Tigers.

He had hardly gotten out of hearing when the Cattle Queen asked:

"Dagger Don, what does this mean?"

"Liza says that the chief came back last night and asked for his captive, and was told that you had taken her to her home."

"Then he saw Jew Jim, who told him twenty of the men were in hiding here, and so he sent for them, armed them all thoroughly, picked out the best horses from the corral, and started off, as Liza heard him say, for a rapid raid of the settlements."

"He knew that Buck Taylor's men were watching him from the range, so made a flank movement in the darkness, so as to not let him know that he was on the war trail, and was to move around by the Canyon of Caverns."

"But Buck Taylor came here this morning, saw the trail, and I had just arrived and only heard the truth from Liza, so I thought best to tell him, the men had been hiding in the hills, and were led in on foot by Liza to raid the corral."

"That is why I told you what I did before Monte Joe, so that no one need know that you had the men in hiding here."

"That was right, and you have saved me, Dagger Don, and never will I forget you for it."

"I am done with Tiger Tom, and, thank Heaven! I never allowed him to put the Star and Tiger brand in my hand."

"I had intended to take the trail myself; but I was desperate then, and now I shall live under no sinful shadow, for the end must soon come, as Buck Taylor will now follow Tiger Tom to the grave, mark my words."

"I am sure of it, Lady Captain, and I am glad to hear you say what you do about your own career, for it is not for you to become a Tigress, because the man you loved donned the name of Tiger," said Dagger Don, earnestly.

CHAPTER LXIV.

IN AT THE END.

BUCK TAYLOR had shown considerable strategy in remaining near the old Mission Ranch.

He had not surrounded it, as the Cattle Queen had expected he would; but he had taken up his camp in the mountains, where with his powerful glass he could see it by day, and at night sent out his spies to camp as close as they dared.

He also sent out scouts, and was rewarded by one coming in and reporting that a large trail had been found leading from the Rio toward the Canyon of Caverns.

This trail was fresh and consisted of some forty horses, while that they were Mexicans the scout firmly believed.

Another scout brought in word that he had met Captain Hassan and twenty of his Cowboy Clan in search for his daughter, who had been kidnapped, he was sure by Tiger Tom, as the horse track they had followed was one that Rio Grande Rob knew as that of one of the animals of the chief.

They had gone to the Rio Grande, and there had taken the trail of the Mexicans, who were heading for the Canyon of Caverns.

Learning that Buck Taylor and his men were near, Captain Hassan had sent word that he would flank the canyon with his men, while the next morning, he, Buck Taylor should ride in from the lower end and attack.

This Buck Taylor was going to do, when his spies reported that Tiger Tom had gone into the old Mission Ranch and had soon after appeared with a number of horses.

So Buck Taylor took the trail of the Tigers, and found that it led around to the Canyon of Caverns.

As the Tigers had gotten the horses from

the ranch, Buck Taylor concluded that, after all, they had been hiding in the mountains until led in by Tiger Tom, and on foot had eluded his spies.

Rapidly he got his men together and pressed hot upon the trail from the ranch, for, seeing Dagger Don, the latter had said the horses had been stolen from the corral, the armory broken open and the men all armed with weapons taken from it, while the Cattle Queen was away, he knew not where.

Pushing along the trail, with the knowledge that Tiger Tom had some twenty-two other men with him, the Lasso King soon saw that he was not heading for Mexico, but for the Canyon of Caverns.

"I see it all now, he intends to join the two forces, and this plays directly into my hands," he said.

"Captain Hassan reached the upper end by daybreak, sir, I guess," said a cowboy.

"Yes, and we will be at the lower end by noon.

"It is another case of rats in a trap, and this time not a man must escape."

"What force do you think they have, sir?"

"Well, forty from across the river and twenty odd with Tiger Tom."

"And you have forty, sir."

"Yes, and Captain Hassan twenty men, so we will be about equal."

"I only wish Monte Joe was here to see this row," said Buck.

It was about an hour after, as they were going slowly along the hill trails, to avoid an ambush, should one have been arranged, that a cowboy in the rear reported a horseman coming like the very wind after them.

Buck Taylor halted his men, and turned his glass upon the horseman.

"Monte Joe! by all that's glorious!" he cried, and the men could hardly restrain a cheer.

In ten minutes more Monte Joe rode up, his horse panting and sides white with foam, for he had not spared the animal in his determination to overtake the cowboys.

In a few words he told Buck Taylor as they rode along together, all that had occurred, and added that he felt that they had wronged the Cattle Queen.

"I begin to think so myself, Monte Joe," answered Buck, and then they pressed on once more toward the canyon.

It was just noon when they were greeted by a shot at the entrance, and saw a horseman wheel and dash away.

With wild cheers they charged after him, and their well known war-cry was answered afar off by the yell of the Hassan clan, who also were coming to the attack from the upper end of the canyon.

It was a complete surprise, for they followed the outlaw sentinel quickly into the camp of the two bands, the Tigers, and their allies from Mexico, whom the chief had sent to Pablo Monon to send to him, and who had led them himself.

It was a fatal act upon his part, for he was one of the first to fall, and the cry arose among the Texans now:

"No quarter to Tigers!"

Men fell upon all sides, and give and take was everywhere.

But the Texans were maddened to desperation, and the outlaws were driven back to the side of the canyon, and there they died standing at bay.

"Don't kill him! he must hang!" cried Buck Taylor, and he threw his fatal lariat at Tiger Tom.

It dragged him down, and there was no resistance, while the words came faintly:

"I am already mortally wounded."

"Let me speak to you before I die."

"What have you to say, Tiger Tom?"

"I am not Tiger Tom."

"I am Trescott Tracey, the twin brother of Thomas Tracey, whom you killed, Buck Taylor."

"This bullet in my side was fired by Captain Hassan there."

"I was always a curse to my brother, ruined my father, and imbibited my brother's life until he, too, became a demon as I have been."

"I saw him buried, dug him up, and you will find his grave in this canyon, as proof of my words—yonder, by that tree."

"I was the image of him, and I played my cards to impersonate him, and this is my end,

as was his; but I cheat the gallows, don't I, Saddle King Taylor?"

They were his last words, for his head fell back, and he was dead.

He had led a strange, evil life, he had hounded his brother down until he had driven him also to deeds of wickedness and desperation.

Then he had impersonated him at the last, and no one had ever known the secret, for Tiger Tom had never betrayed the fact that he had a twin-brother, who was his exact counterpart in size, in face and voice—yes, and in his fiendish nature as well.

CHAPTER LXV.

CONCLUSION.

THE confession of the dying chief was a surprise to one and all who heard it.

Captain Hassan who had fought like the hero he was, had gone to work in the discharge of a surgeon's duties, the moment the chief's head fell back.

He made but one comment, as he knelt, and felt the man's pulse.

"He is dead, and so was Tiger Tom."

"I knew that I was right."

There were many for him to devote himself to, and he set to work with a will.

Senor Pablo had also fallen, so the two chiefs were dead, and their followers who were not dead and wounded had cried so lustily for mercy at last that the Cowboy Clans had shown themselves merciless by taking them prisoners.

Not a man of the band had escaped, and yet the cowboys had also been heavy sufferers.

"If there is a man who now wears the brand of the Tigers of Texas I would like to find him," said Monte Joe, as he walked over the scene, lending aid where he could, for he was no mean surgeon himself.

Buck Taylor had been twice wounded, and yet only slightly.

His face was stern and yet his eyes had a triumphant flash in them.

At last he was sent for by a dying Mexican who said that he had something to confess to him.

Buck Taylor found him to be a mere boy, and one with a dark, exceedingly handsome face.

"Senor, I am dying, so confess to you a secret."

"Senor Pablo there is my my father—I am his daughter."

"His daughter?" gasped Buck Taylor.

"Yes, and I loved the Senor Chief, and when my father came on this raid I would come too, and so dressed as a boy."

"I have gotten my death-wound, and bad man though he was, I loved the American senor, and I ask you to bury me by his side—will you, Senor Captain?"

"I pledge you my word to do so."

"But you may not be mortally wounded and Captain Hassan is also a surgeon—I will call him."

She urged him not to do so, but Buck Taylor persisted and Captain Hassan and Monte Joe came together.

Buck Taylor told the girl's sad story to them in a few words, and kneeling by her side Captain Hassan said:

"My poor child, let me see if you are fatally hurt."

"I know that I am."

"Yes, you are."

"You cannot last much longer," he said, after a quick examination of the wound.

"I am glad to go," she said sadly.

And then she closed her eyes, to open them a moment after and say:

"Remember your promise, Senor Captain, bury us side by side—the chief—and—I."

Buck grasped her hand and said:

"I will remember—ah! she is dead."

"War is a frightful curse," said Monte Joe as he walked quickly away.

The wounded were first looked after, and then the young girl and the chief were buried apart from the others, and side by side, while Senor Pablo was placed near.

The grave of the real Tiger Tom was then opened, and in it was found the giant form of the Ranchero Desperado, fast moldering to decay.

"Buck."

"Well, Monte Joe."

"I shall envelop this form in blankets and bear it to the loving wife, for she still loves this man, for he never deserted her, be his crimes what they may."

"It is just like you, Monte Joe," was the answer, and the gambler at once set to work to carry out his intention.

The remains were enveloped in an oil-cloth, then in a dozen or more blankets, each bound with lariats, the serapes and lassoes of the dead Mexicans being made use of.

Then the body was strapped upon the large horse that had been Tiger Tom's, and mounting his own animal Monte Joe set out for the old Mission Ranch, saying to Captain Hassan that from there he would go on by Soldier's Retreat to Trail Crossing, and in a few days return, as he had business to call him to Round-top Post.

"Say to my wife that I will remain until Surgeon Schufeldt comes from Round-top, and then come on with my wounded by slow marches to the ranch," said Captain Hassan.

It was night when Monte Joe reached the old Mission Ranch, and yet his approach had been seen, and the Cattle Queen was on the piazza to welcome him.

"Mrs. Tracey, I have something to tell you that will give you joy for one reason, and yet it will be allied with sorrow.

"First, tell me did your husband have a brother?"

"I never knew of it if he did, sir."

"Well, he did have a brother, a twin," and then the story was told as the dying chief had made it known.

"We proved it," continued Monte Joe, "by taking up the body of your husband, from where his brother had borne and buried it, and I took the liberty of wrapping the remains in blankets and bringing them to you, for, as he never deserted you, you yet love his memory."

She could not utter a word, but took his hand and pressed it in silence.

Then the men were called and the body of Tiger Tom was placed in the grave from which it had been taken by his brother.

That night Monte Joe passed at the old Mission Ranch, going on his way the next morning early, and reaching Soldier's Retreat that night, where the story was all told again.

The next day he went on his way to Trail Crossing, and he was gone some two weeks ere he returned.

When he did so Captain Hassan had gotten home with his men, and he was warmly welcomed by all, for he had said nothing to the ranchero of his daring rescue of his daughter, simply stating that the Cattle Queen had taken her home.

"Now, Mrs. Hassan, I wish to tell you a secret, you and Miss Belle, that Captain Hassan already knows.

"Some two years ago an army officer was detailed for certain secret service, and it was no more than hunting down all the outlaws on the frontier who were robbing Government trains and doing other lawless deeds.

"As he was allowed to go his own way about it, and was phenomenally lucky as a card-player, he turned gambler for the while, and it just suited his purpose, for with the destruction of the band of Tigers, he has seen the last members of a very dangerous band go under.

"Permit me to say that the name of this officer is Lieutenant Joseph Monteal, and you have known him only as Monte Joe."

The reader can surmise how glad was Belle Hassan to hear this story, for she had learned to love the officer with all her heart, and she knew that her love was returned.

As for the Tigress of Texas, she still continued to dwell on the old Mission Ranch, true to her first and only love, though urged by Dagger Don to become his wife.

Finding that she would not marry him, Dagger Don went to other scenes, but where nobody seemed to know.

And Buck Taylor?

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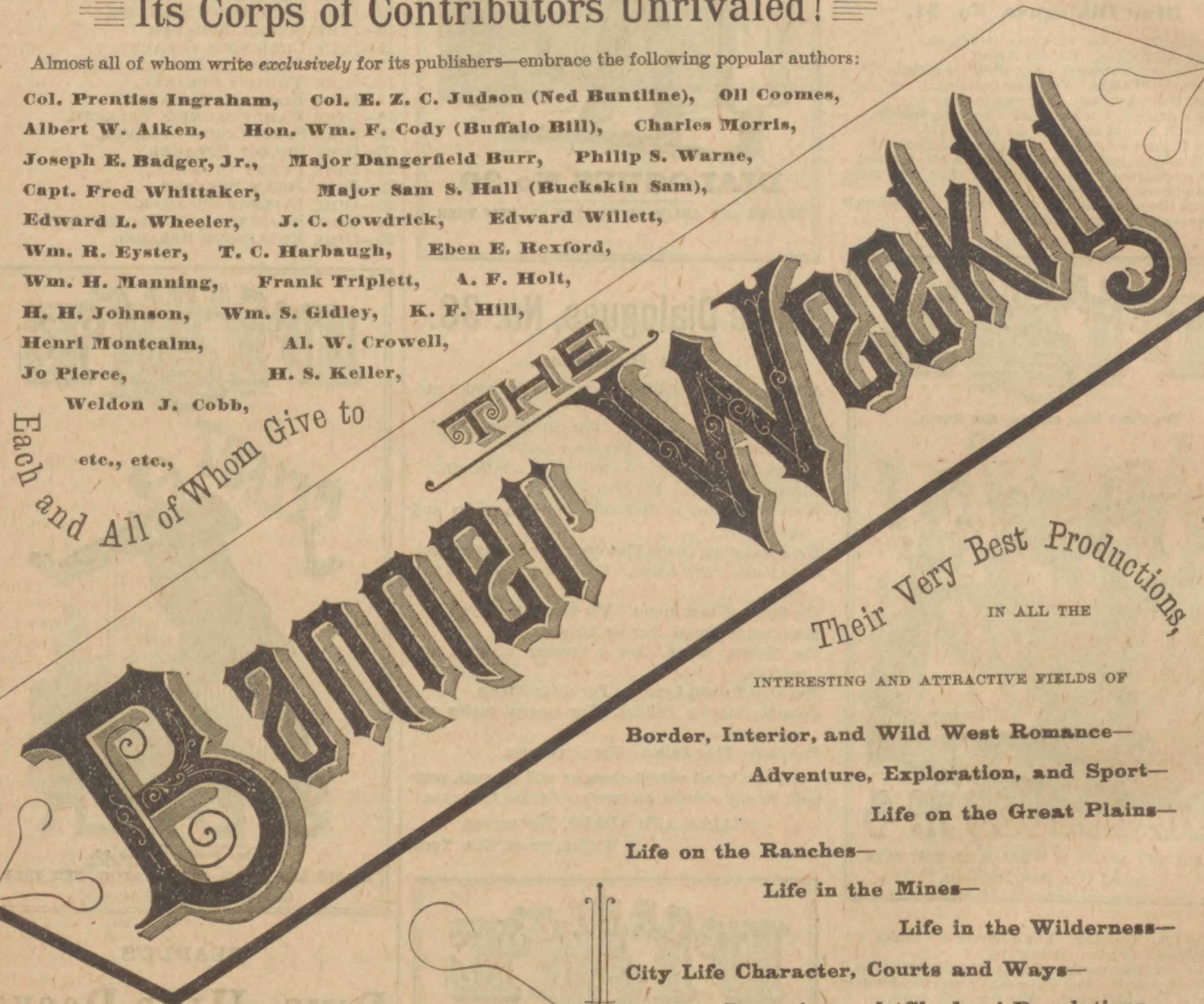
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